

**Bikies, Burqas and Bakhtin: Autoethnographic
Reflections on a Carnavalesque Life.**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Megan Green

Dedication

To my Dad (Dahjio) and Mum (Momo), whose
mutual “sense of the ridiculous” permeates this thesis.

Abstract

Autoethnography, as one of its leading practitioners Carolyn Ellis notes, allows the researcher to examine and write about their life in ways that are analytical, evocative and highly personal. Utilising this self-reflexive methodology and drawing on an eclectic set of data from both the past and present, I explore the way in which my life has exhibited aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" mode, and how certain humorous enactments have worked to undermine cultural conformity. I also critically reflect on my upbringing in a Christian family and attempt to draw a link not only between my own personal faith and carnival, but a broader connection between Christianity and the carnivalesque. The trickster – a key carnival figure – is simultaneously examined, manifest throughout not only in specific comic instances, but via the unorthodox nature of the thesis itself, which incorporates humorous paraphernalia such as memes, tweets and comic strips, and intertwines the "creative" and the "theoretical" in ways that are illuminating and occasionally disharmonious. Subjective experiences are filtered through various theoretical frameworks, among them feminist, anthropological, sociological and theological, contextualising the writing, and grounding it within an academic setting.

As is often the case with the autoethnographic approach, outcomes are less easily defined, more open to interpretation and reinterpretation, and it is for this reason that I speak of personal "reflections" rather than "findings" when discussing this thesis. What has emerged is the sense that my life is strongly informed by the carnivalesque, interwoven with moments of trickster-like disruption that often serve to challenge the status quo. Alternatively, I have encountered instances of extra-carnival behaviour, of subscription to those same cultural norms I claim to undermine. Significantly, such inclinations are often treated with an ironic, mocking glance, thereby channelling the self-directed laughter of carnival. Part of the uniqueness of this thesis lies in the fact that it diminishes the traditional distinction between theory and practice. Rather than simply examining the carnivalesque from a comfortable distance, I employ autoethnography as a means of *embodying* the carnivalesque, illuminating Bakhtinian theories such as dialogism *in* and *through* the research process, outcome and artefact. In this way, scholarship on both the carnivalesque and doctoral writing (particularly in the arena of creative arts) is extended and reimagined. This thesis seeks to shed new light on the carnivalesque by placing it within a particular, idiosyncratic context (the life of a 21st century, white Australian woman of Christian heritage) and by "living out" the humorous and subversive potentiality of carnival.

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Waiters can fail for two reasons. They're either constantly hovering around your table, interrupting you at a critical point in the conversation, or they mysteriously vanish when you're ready to order.

The same principle applies to supervisors.

Luckily, Jennifer De Reuck and Simone Lazaroo fall into neither of these camps. Any potential stress related to researching and writing this PhD was significantly reduced by their supervisory style; one which (often uncannily) balanced these two elements. I was given space when I needed it the most, and readily-available guidance whenever the thread of my argument, and possibly my sanity, had deserted me.

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Prologue

Towards the end of my PhD, I realised that separating the “theoretical” component from the “creative” component was a bad idea – one that had less to do with following my own particular vision for the work than it did with adhering to traditional formatting guidelines. My eventual decision to combine the two sections was based on a number of reasons, the first being that the majority of my “creative” writing comprised humorous personal essays or vignettes, and thus had about it – at the very least – the *auto* aspect of the autoethnographic methodology underpinning my “theoretical” component. Furthermore, the comic introspection that generally accompanied these essays mimicked the kind of probing personal enquiry typical of autoethnography, as well as the desire to locate this personal aspect within the *ethno* of its wider social and cultural context. Interestingly, despite any conscious attempt to link the two, many of the stories from my “creative” component covered the same themes and issues raised in the “theoretical” component. The insertion of these stories as comedic “moments,” I realised, not only served as a form of trickster-like disruption, but often cast new light on the insights gleaned from a more traditional, analytical approach.¹

Finally, and in line with one of the key objectives of this thesis, I wished to examine and challenge certain social and cultural norms – in this case, the underlying assumption that creative writing is a less suitable vehicle through which to enact “real” or “legitimate” academic investigation. In his book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Paul Dawson attests to the prevalence of this mindset within universities, noting of the discipline of Creative Writing that while it “operates largely within departments of English or Literary Studies” it is nonetheless “somehow seen as separate to that domain of academic activity, as practice rather than theory, primary rather than secondary, research equivalence rather than research, embodied in a split between the creative and the critical, the writer and the critic” (2005, 20). Incorporating these two disciplines, I believe, works to challenge this artificial distinction, to highlight not only the way in which creative writing can function as an apt investigative and analytical tool, but to question the interrelated notion that scholarly writing must rid itself of any idiosyncrasy, creativity or humour in order to be taken “seriously.”²

¹ I have illustrated the shift in voice (and therefore dialogue) that occurs in the “creative” component of this thesis by using an alternative font.

² In light of this stated aim of frustrating the distinction between “academic” and creative writing, I have used abbreviations such as “couldn’t” and “won’t” throughout both components rather than the more formal “could not” or “will not.”

In addition to my decision to combine the two components, I had the earlier task of trying to figure out what exactly should be included in the “creative” body of work. I knew, for example, that I wanted to write shorter pieces, but should those pieces be similar in length? Would they be works of fiction or non-fiction? And to what degree should they adhere in style and form? Eventually, however, I realised that all of these concerns could be subsumed under one overarching question, namely: *Does this writing evoke the carnival?* If it didn’t, it didn’t make the cut. If it did, it was included regardless of the fact that the writing might not always be uniform in style, structure, form or theme. What I am certain of is that each of these pieces are examples of carnivalized writing, that they are opposed to monologic discourse, and that they employ those quintessentially carnivalesque tools of satire, parody and irony. (Importantly, many of the stories relate instances in which I, myself, embody the carnival fool, channelling the “universal aspect” of carnival laughter.)

As mentioned above, those looking for unambiguous connection between the various “creative” works included in this thesis may be disappointed. The majority of the pieces are non-fiction, and sit quite neatly within the autoethnographic framework of this thesis. *My Cultural Capital*, *Fan Mail*, *Romance to Burn*, *A Word of Advice*, *The Fright of Your Life* and *Captain Chastity*, on the other hand, are fictional, and thus their inclusion may at times seem incongruous. These pieces, however, uniquely demonstrate the parodic and satiric destabilising enacted in carnival by incorporating ludicrous elements (the kind that are generally unavailable to the non-fiction writer). *A Word of Advice*, for example, uses extreme exaggeration to parody the traditional beauty advice column, thereby augmenting the surrounding commentary on unrealistic beauty ideals. *Fan Mail*, on the other hand, does not speak specifically to the chapter in which it is placed, but acts as a moment of comic interruption, recalling the trickster through its incorporation of absurd elements, playful irreverence – in this case, towards the cult of celebrity – and the creative and regenerative elements common to most trickster tales (albeit none of the genital dismemberment or airborne excrement!).

This thesis is non-linear, circuitous, and the dispersal of both fiction and non-fiction pieces throughout the “theoretical” component may not always make for a smooth read.³ I am reassured, however, by the fact that this serves as an embodiment of the autoethnographic process – marked as it is by interruptions, backtracking, and countless reconfigurations. Such meandering is the inevitable fallout of utilising a methodology which incorporates the “lived life” into the research process. Furthermore,

³ For the most part I also resist the urge to *explicitly* outline the connections between the various “creative” pieces and their more theoretical/analytical surrounds. As mentioned above, the creative body of work has made its way into this thesis primarily on the basis of it being an example of carnivalised writing. In those sections where there *is* a strong link between the two that has not been expanded upon, I encourage the reader to form their own connections, thus allowing for the co-constructed nature of autoethnographic writing as well as the dialogic interplay of the carnivalesque.

chaos and disunity is commensurate with the trickster, whose being and *modus operandi* defies coherence. In the words of Karl Kerényi: "Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function . . . is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted" (1972, 185).

“Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it” (Oscar Wilde).

INTRODUCTION

As has become apparent over the course of writing this PhD, much research on humour and the carnivalesque is dry, failing to embody the object of its investigation. My goal is that this thesis does the opposite, challenging E.B. White’s classic aphorism: “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (2011, 129). Doing so meant straying from the conventional format, but as will hopefully become apparent to the reader by the time the *average BMI* lady sings, this was not as much warranted as it was required. Nothing scared me more than the idea of writing a work on the carnivalesque that was about as interesting as small talk at an accountancy firm’s Christmas party. Even worse for it to not invoke laughter. *I hope neither of these fears is realised.*

Throughout the text, I will be inserting various comic artefacts (memes, jokes, comic strips etc.) that were either favourites of mine growing up, or that I have encountered during the course of my research and writing – purposeful interruptions that embody the trickster figure who is so central to this thesis. These are orchestrated disturbances, comedic markers, to remind us of the disruptive and subversive nature of the humour that underscores the carnival. Jokes often operate by momentarily upsetting logic, or through a “problematization of sense” (N. Carroll 2014, 22), and if the combination of “highbrow” theory and the perceived “lowbrow” nature of jokes is jarring in this thesis, it is intentionally so. As anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson notes: “At the center of any tradition, it is easy to become blind to alternatives. At the edges, where lines are blurred, it is easier to imagine that the world might be different. Vision sometimes arises from confusion” (1989, 73).

My research topic has grown out of a desire to examine the role of humour in my life, and to understand why it has been – and continues to be – a quality that I value highly, both in myself and others. In the course of my broader investigation into humour and the particular way it has manifested in my life (via autoethnographic investigation), I realised that many of the defining humorous instances in my life were distinctly carnivalesque in nature. Accordingly, my direction was further refined as I sought to understand the way that the carnivalesque, particularly, has been evident in my life. Furthermore, I wanted to examine the way in which these carnivalesque “occurrences” have worked to undermine cultural conformity and challenge stereotyping.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The central research question (namely, *how has my life displayed elements of the carnivalesque?*) is underpinned by the following subsidiary questions:

How has carnivalesque *humour*, in particular, been evident in my life? In answering this question, I examine the carnivalesque nature of humour and humorous instances from my life. These “instances,” several of them taking the form of pranks or tricks, invoke the trickster, and contain within them a carnivalesque desire to expose pomposity, undermine hierarchical binaries and challenge traditional, often oppressive, cultural norms.

How have I embodied the trickster figure that is so central to carnival? To answer this question, I reflect on several pranks that I have performed either before or during the course of writing this thesis that embody the trickster, an agent of the kind of humorous subversion that typifies carnival. This involves examining, and then elaborating on, both our similarities and dissimilarities.

How have these carnivalesque traits or “instances” served to undermine cultural conformity and challenge stereotypes? I answer this question by returning to those carnivalesque events from my life that have occurred either before or during the process of writing this thesis, examining the way that they have operated as a subversive tool, undermining cultural conformity and/or stereotyping and questioning society’s capitulation to certain oppressive social norms. In typically carnivalesque fashion, this involved detailing and examining *my own* adherence to such norms, as well as outlining the ways I have rallied against them.

How does the Christian faith which has informed my life and identity display elements of the carnivalesque? I expand on this question by reflecting on my upbringing in a Christian family, as well as delineating between certain “camps” of Christianity. Ultimately, I aim to test the hypothesis that both my own personal understanding of, and approach to, the Christian faith, as well as the broader faith itself, exhibit aspects of the carnivalesque.

A BIT ABOUT ME

I'm the youngest of four and one of the darker sheep in an admittedly "white" family. My parents met at Teachers College where my dad – reported to have been a "man about campus" – convinced my mum that he was terrible at Maths in order to get some one-on-one tutoring lessons which eventually culminated in wedding bells, four kids and 26 years of marriage before dad passed away from cancer in 2001. Both my parents grew up in non-religious families – my mum's dad had renounced his Jewish faith years before she was born – and while my mum had retained this indifference, my dad was always searching for something more, investigating many faiths before being convinced of the claims of Christianity. They eventually both decided to become Christians, though, after attending a Bible study recommended by "otherwise normal" friends from college (mum was initially reluctant to go, hoping that whatever new fad this was, Dad would soon snap out of it). He never did, and she was pleasantly surprised when she realised that she had acquired a faith of her own.

I came along shortly after, in 1983, on a day that had started promisingly, but had ended with my mum pushing a whopping 10-pound 11-ounce child from her nether regions. My massive girth nabbed me a coveted spot in the local paper with the title "What A Whopper," which I believe may have led to later body concerns. (That, or the fact that I ate too many Whoppers.) I was a clingy child – one of the annoyingly clingy ones – and a therapist would later assure me that the reason behind my separation anxiety and, in fact, a whole raft of other neuroses, was that I'd looked into my mother's eyes when I was a child and seen that she didn't have enough love to give. (I'm pretty sure I was just crapping my pants and sleeping at that stage, but I humoured her for another two sessions before mum found out what she'd said and cut the funding.) Oddly enough, I was also a very confident kid – nicknamed "the show pony" by my pa – and would take every opportunity to steal the limelight. It's an anomaly that continues to this day: I am in turn self-assured and plagued by self-doubt. Some evidence of that will be included in this thesis, particularly as it relates to my concerns with body image and what I perceive to be the challenging aspects of having a Christian faith in a predominantly secular society.

I have always placed a great deal of importance on humour, and I realised over the course of writing this thesis that it has helped me deal with many of these challenges. My love of humour is obviously a personality trait, but it is also related to my upbringing and the fact that it was a quality valued so highly in our family. I recently found out from one of dad's ex-classmates that he had been the "class clown" (a title bestowed upon me, less affectionately, by several school teachers). Similarly, one of my sister's ex-boyfriends referred to mum as the "circus master" due to her exuberant personality and desire to obtain a laugh at any cost. As a result, I'm immediately attracted to people who have a

good sense of humour, and who enjoy seeing “the ridiculous” (to borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis), even in the seemingly mundane aspects of everyday life.

Even at my lowest points (and some of those troughs will be documented here), I have still been able to laugh. Perhaps even more so then, when the seeming hopelessness and absurdity of my situation drew attention to the absurdities of life in general. Here, I am reminded of Kurt Vonnegut’s humorous insight: “Laughs are exactly as honorable as tears. Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion, to the futility of thinking and striving anymore. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward” (as quoted in Klinkowitz 2009, 78). What follows is a series of snapshots or vignettes from my life, and a “look-in” at the way that that life has been informed and underpinned by, carnivalesque humour. My hope is that it provides some comedically-charged insights into the ways in which humour can be used to deconstruct and challenge oppressive aspects of dominant culture, as well as embodying a “carnival spirit” which “offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world” (Bakhtin 1984, 34).

Move Over, Meryl



(Fig. 1)

Winning the lead role in our grade two production of *Rockin' Robin* changed my life. Even now, I recall those five or ten minutes of fame with fondness, remember the adulation of class mates who, post-performance, gathered around me saying "you were SO GREAT" while I unslung my foil-covered cardboard Fender from my shoulders and assured them that while, yes, I *had* done a magnificent job, they should really have seen me in my bedroom the night before. Their continuing support, I reassured them, was nonetheless appreciated.

In hindsight, the role should probably have gone to someone else, someone who could inspire (unrelated) audience members to coo and fawn, saying the kind of things young mothers are fond of saying to one another: *what a little miracle*, or, *is heaven down one angel today?* In short, someone whose face wasn't messed up. I, on the other hand, was recovering from a bicycling mishap in which I donated several layers of my dermis to the pavement and narrowly avoided breaking my neck.

In the days that followed the accident, I realised that cervical fracture resulting in death might not have been such a bad thing. The deepest graze I had acquired ran the length of my upper lip, and while it was unsightly enough as a red-raw streak of skin, it became something else entirely when that same graze healed into a thick brown scab. Gone was the adorable seven-year-old girl with the faintly-discernible Canadian twang, and in her place, Magnum PI.

Despite the drastic change to my appearance, I insisted that I keep the lead role, and informed my teacher that calling an understudy in would be a grave mistake. While I certainly *could* take a step back,

assume the part of a lesser swallow or chickadee, it would be to the detriment of the production. Others were adequate, I told my teacher, but they lacked my inimitable stage presence, my *je ne sais quoi*.

*He rocks in the tree tops all day long
Hoppin' and a-boppin' and singing his song
All the little birdies on Jaybird Street
Love to hear the robin go tweet tweet tweet*

From memory, my hoppin' and a-boppin' and tweet tweet tweetin' surpassed that of Bobby Day or any of the later artists who would perform his song. Behind me all the avian occupants of Jaybird Street – the buzzards and orioles, the ravens, crows and wise old owls – twittered and twirled as parents clapped and flashbulbs popped. It bothered me little that several audience members looked horrified by my appearance – *who was this "girl," and why did she have a moustache? Had the transgender agenda visited us this early on? And if so, good Lord, they wanted no part of it* – because I had the unfailing admiration of my parents and peers, all capable of seeing beyond my aesthetic shortcomings.

Due in part to this early brush with celebrity, I never ruled out the idea of a career in singing, acting, or both. Which is why, thirteen years later, twenty-year-old me could be found impersonating a vegetable at a local TAFE course; halfway through a Certificate One in Acting that promised great things and provided the names of people who had gone on to star in Woolworths commercials. In order to develop our versatility, we were tasked with channeling the aforementioned vegetable of our choice. No inspiration had struck me during Peter's impersonation of a carrot, or Carla's surprisingly poignant dialogue between her turnip and celery self, so when it was my go, I got up and spun around for a while and then stopped and said that I was a tomato that had been blended into spaghetti sauce. There were a few confused claps and I bowed and simulated mopping up the spillage on the way back to my seat.

Difficult as it is to imagine, my name wasn't plastered on billboards six months later. This, I reasoned, was because a movie with a vegetable as lead character wasn't very marketable. (I retracted that a year later when I saw my first Marlon Brando film: *Andonyafahgetit* – it's like a streetcar named desire *ran him over*.) While Brando and those of his ilk may not have found their breakout roles between the pages of a paper that sells cheap pot plants and used baby clothes, each journey was unique, I told myself, as I flipped through Perth's then leading classifieds publication *Quokka*. And there it was – my very unorthodox, very *unique* ticket out of Maida Vale – just below the section titled *Miscellaneous*.

Actors wanted for local TV series, it said, in bolded Times New Roman, *all ages and sizes considered*.

Life, I imagined, would be lonely at the top, full of movie premieres and glittering awards ceremonies but lacking in genuine human connection, and so I recruited a couple of friends to come along to the auditions with me. Both lacked my illustrious background in the field, but could do a very convincing impersonation of a fridge if they stood still enough. Death scenes were trickier.

"Stop blinking!" I'd say to my friend Sharon, during one of our many takes. "You've just been hit by a frigging semi-trailer." There would be twenty more attempts, each of them ending in Sharon giggling uncontrollably, her imaginary entrails strewn along the highway of our lounge room floor.

Undaunted by our lack of talent, my friends and I set off for the studio, eyes aglow with the prospect of impending stardom. Who knew where this would take us? And how long would it be before people we'd met through a friend of a friend, or once, in passing, were claiming to know us *really well*?

"I could always tell she had something," a girl from our kindergarten class might say direct to camera, after the breakout success of our first film: "We were very good friends." The reporter whose face you couldn't pick would nod.

"I knew her too. I felt the same way."

This was one of fame's quirks – a sudden acquisition of friends and acquaintances, none of whom you, the celebrity, actually knew. It must have been incredibly frustrating for Heath Ledger, I thought, having everybody in Perth claim to know him – either personally, or through their mum, or dad, or second cousin once removed. These same parasites, I imagined, would dine out on my success. They would fabricate stories about me based on a single encounter in their childhood, cobbling together fact and fiction for the benefit of gullible listeners and gossip column editors. "Did she really do that?" readers would say, flipping the pages of their magazine and shaking their heads. "Was she honestly that rude? What a piece of work!"

There were other concerns as well: what would I do, for instance, if offered the lead in an R-rated movie? And how was I to deal with scripts that called for full-frontal nudity or excessive violence? I doubted my kind of talent would be squandered on big-budget action flicks or romantic comedies. No, I was likely to attract roles in darker, grittier, productions like *Natural Born Killers* or *Last Tango in Paris*. I would be an indie darling, a Cannes film festival favourite, but at what cost?

Gone would be the refuge of moral absolutes, and in its place my own brand of situational ethics. "It's for the craft, mum," I'd say, of a scene in which I was urinated on by a large German man who would later wear my scalp as a wig. *You can't truly understand the protagonist's motives*, I'd think, signing off on a group orgy, *until you see her both mentally and physically bare*. The accolades would roll in: "Brilliant," "Fearless," "Brave," the New York Times would gush, as the needle on my moral compass hiccupped and spasmed.

There was no more time, however, to dwell on the implications of my soon-to-be-realized dreams of fame and fortune, because my friends and I had arrived at the studio. I could tell it was a studio because they'd installed a set out front that precisely captured the Canningvale spirit; dead grass, a rusty gate and two burnt out cars in the front yard. A huge, oily-looking man in matching tracksuit top and bottom sat on the verandah blowing perfect smoke rings into the frosty late-June air, each crisp circle evidencing a lifetime devoted to the craft. When the creaking gate announced our arrival, he exhaled deeply, extinguishing his cigarette in a nearby ashtray. "You here for the auditions?" he said, wearily, motioning towards the door. "In there, second room on your right." I took his brusqueness as evidence of his professionalism.

"They're all like that," we muttered to each other once inside.

"Apparently, Steven Spielberg doesn't even *talk* to his cast and crew until filming's wrapped," Sharon said, "and that's a FACT."

This image buoyed me – his behavior was in keeping with other directing greats – and continued to do so throughout my audition, when his manners failed to improve. "It's the year 2120," he barked at me, when it was my turn to audition, plonking his enormous backside down on a couch that had at some stage transitioned from white to a queasy yellow, "and you're in the middle of intergalactic warfare." I waited for more information, but his blank expression informed me none would be forthcoming. It would be up to me, I figured, to provide the backstory. I would need a compelling one, too, to help me get into character.

Perhaps there had been a war on the planet Gork, I thought, cogs whirring. Gork was inhabited by aliens, I imagined, but friendly ones. They were Earth's sister planet – our closest interstellar neighbor and ally – and we were going to aid them in their fight against colonisation or outright genocide. But how did this involve me? Why wasn't I still on Earth bringing joy to millions through acting?

The president of the United States had called me specifically, I reasoned, because I was both an excellent actress and a gifted fighter pilot. He required me, and me alone, to restore peace. So much for the general plot, but what of subplots? Was this a straightforward action, or a mixed-genre affair? Was there going to be a romantic angle? A love interest on Gork? *Oh please, let there not be any explicit sex scenes,* I thought, still unsure where I stood on all that.

With a sufficient plotline established, and the issue of intergalactic intercourse thrust to the back of my mind – I would cross that bridge when I came to it – I began to load my gun with bullets. *This is going to be one hell of a battle,* I thought, cramming shells into the chamber and scoping the horizon for targets. My actions, though, rather than communicating an air of verisimilitude, only seemed to annoy the director, who was at this stage halfway through a bag of Doritos.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled through a mouthful of chips, his face a mixture of confusion and exasperation. *This was not good.* Had I failed to render the scene accurately? Was this *not* what a person looked like when loading an Interstellar 3000?

"I'm... well..." I said, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. "I guess I'm loading up my gun for the..."

"No no no," he said, waving a meaty paw in the air and shaking his head. "I mean, *why are you using weapons?!*"

I was confused. How did he think people won wars? "You have to do it..." he said, trailing off. I waited as he rummaged through the dwindling remains of his chip packet. "You have to do it with your *mind*," he said, looking up.

"With my *mind*," I whispered back.

While the idea of shooting spaceships down with my brainpower alone seemed farfetched, even in as distant a future as 2120, I knew that my chosen industry relied on adaptability, and so I furrowed my brow and readied my psychic artillery. I was about to commence warfare when he interrupted again.

"Uh uh," he said, his index finger metronoming back and forth. "Your expression's all wrong." The thought of playing a vegetable was becoming increasingly appealing at this stage, but I was not a quitter. With as indistinct an expression as possible, I attempted to annihilate Gork's aggressors, rescuing its inhabitants from a lifetime of enslavement. With the power of my mind alone, I defeated the invading Zurgites, laid waste to their planet, and restored peace to the entire galaxy. When I had finished, the director looked at me and sighed. "Thanks for coming," he said, "could you send in the next person?"

The encounter was traumatic on a number of levels. Not only had it dashed my dreams of stardom but, perhaps more significantly, it had cast some unsettling doubts on the accuracy of certain childhood memories. If I had failed to convincingly portray a war hero duty-bound to save the people of Gork, how could I trust that my stint as the eponymous Rockin' Robin lived up to my inflated recollections? The upside of all this, I figured, was that I would no longer have to participate in any orgies, or be urinated on by foreigners. *On camera, at least.* Even better, I could once again relay to listeners my Heath Ledger story, the one relayed to me by my friend's sister's aunt. She had seen Heath at the supermarket, she said, and he was *really* rude.

"Pretty damn stuck-up," I would say to my audience. "Had a real ego on him, apparently." And once again, the crowd would gasp, incredulous.

"Did he really do that?" they'd say, eyes boggling in disbelief. "Was he honestly that rude? What a piece of work!"

METHODOLOGY

My methodological journey evolved in tandem with the narrowing of my research focus. As my question moved toward examining the manifestation of humour in my own life, specifically, I was faced with the task of finding a methodology that would be the “right fit” for such a subjective investigation while still being sufficiently analytical. Furthermore, I was in search of a methodology that was unorthodox, allowing space for the subversiveness and creativity that is characteristic of both humour and the carnival. That methodology was autoethnography. In this chapter, I outline my journey towards my research question/s and expand on the reasons behind my choice of autoethnography as a methodology.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY 101

Autoethnography, according to several of its key practitioners, is “both process and product” (Ellis, T.E. Adams, and Bochner 2011, par. 1), and can be defined as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis 2004, xix). It is a methodology that values reflexivity and “considers personal experience as an important source of knowledge in and of itself, as well as a source of insight into cultural experience” (Ellis and T.E. Adams 2014, 254). The reflexivity that is so integral to autoethnography is described by Kim Etherington in terms of being “aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work” in addition to evaluating “how these impact on the ways we interpret our world” (2004, 19). How autoethnography is operationalised differs, Deborah Reed-Danahay noting that autoethnographers “vary in their emphasis on the writing and research process (*graphy*), culture (*ethnos*), and self (*auto*)” (1997, 2). Despite the difference in weighting that researchers and writers allot to each of these areas, I agree with Heewon Chang’s assertion “that autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (2016, 48).

Ellis, T.E. Adams and Bochner place autoethnography’s roots in the postmodern “crisis of confidence” which they state opened up “new and abundant opportunities to reform social science and reconceive the objectives and forms of social science inquiry” (2011, par. 1). Autoethnography challenged the notion that the researcher was to be excluded from the research process where, traditionally, “epistemological and/or ontological priority is given to phenomena that are directly observable [and] any appeal to intangibles runs the risk of being dismissed as metaphysical nonsense” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 4). Although the above quote is over two decades old, the sentiment lingers,

Ronald Pelias noting that “despite the fact that many have declared the logical positivist house in ruins, scholars continue to reside there” (2005, 417). Furthermore, Robin Grenier, in an article written in 2015, suggests that autoethnography remains “a methodological subject that sends shivers up the spines of traditional, post/positivist scholars” (333).

In *Accommodating an Autoethnographic PhD*, Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook (PhD student and supervisor respectively) outline some of the hurdles Doloriert faced in utilising autoethnography as a methodology in her PhD. While their account is sobering, especially given its relative recentness, their insight into the potency of the methodology rings true. They note of autoethnography that it “enables the researcher to acknowledge the often powerful and significant role of the self within the research process, connecting the self to the research topic” (2011, 586). It is this introspective facet of the autoethnographic process that gives it its unique, if controversial, edge on some of the more established methodologies. Part of its production of “new knowledge” so critical to the PhD is based in its ability to evoke emotion rather than to simply present new findings. It is sufficiently critical, but has the added benefit of shifting the researcher into the role of both observer and observed. Analyst and analysed. As Ellis notes, herein lies its strength as a methodology. She states: “Who would make a better subject than a researcher consumed by wanting to figure it all out?” (1991, 29-30).

Autoethnography was becoming an increasingly desirable framework through which I could examine the role of humour in my life. A disjuncture, however, between my work and the work of other practitioners in the field was that autoethnography has historically focussed, and continues to focus, on issues that are of a more serious nature, or “the kinds of experience we might not ordinarily talk about publicly” (L. Turner 2013, 213). As Leon Anderson notes: “In the past decade, evocative autoethnographers have published fairly extensively, especially (although not exclusively) on topics related to emotionally wrenching experiences, such as illness, death, victimization, and divorce” (2006, 377). Ellis notes of autoethnography that it “shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433). *Composing Ethnography* (a book edited by Ellis and Bochner) is replete with sobering autoethnographic testimonies, from Lisa M. Tillmann-Healy’s story of battling with bulimia (1996), to Carol Rambo Ronai’s account of living with a mother with mental disabilities (1996). Elsewhere, Tessa Muncey has discussed sexual abuse and teen pregnancy (2005), Tony E. Adams, the challenges of “coming out” (2011), and A. Grant his struggles with alcoholism (2010).

I believe, however, that placing undue emphasis on autoethnography’s role as a tool with which one can explore and address these “dire circumstances and loss of meaning” is unnecessarily limiting. It is

equally suitable for examining humorous instances from one's life, not least because of the fact that the tragic and the comic so often overlap. In his juxtaposition of Tristram Shandy and Oedipus Rex, Stanley Eskin notes that "the catharsis of tragedy and the laughter of comedy may be of one substance, and their function may be to resolve identical or analogous tensions, which are the tensions of human existence" (1963, 277).⁴

In addition, the unconventional and disruptive nature of autoethnography makes it a particularly apt methodology for examining humour. As Reed-Danahay asserts, "one of the main characteristics of an autoethnographic perspective is that the autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser" (1997, 3). In a similar vein, Muncey talks about "unexamined assumptions" being "the staple diet of the autoethnographer" (2010, xi). Humour, especially as it is enumerated within the context of this PhD, rallies against stultifying norms and involves the challenging of such "unexamined assumptions." As Simon Critchley notes, "the comic world is . . . the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters" (2002, 1).

Lastly, the trickster figure which forms part of the basis of this thesis is most suitably examined, I believe, within a methodology that allows room for creative subversion and which questions claims of "legitimacy" within academic writing and researching. As Andrea Ploder and Johanna Stadlbauer state:

Autoethnography is a rather deviant approach, breaking several "rules of the academic game." It transgresses the border between academic and artistic work; refuses to present clear-cut findings, theories, and arguments; and addresses researchers not only as cognitive but also as emotional and physical human beings (2016, 753).

In its blurring of the "academic" and the "artistic," autoethnography challenges the notion that academic writing need be stuffy, impersonal and abstract in order to qualify as such. I sympathise with sociology professor Laurel Richardson, who confesses to having "yawned [his] way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies" (2005, 959), finding in autoethnography an alternative to the kind of scholarly writing he irreverently terms "boring."

Along with this blurring of what we might call "legitimate" and "illegitimate" academic writing and research (in trickster terms a meeting of the "sacred" and the "profane"), autoethnography is further aligned with the trickster via its focus on incisive social and cultural critique. Alec Grant, Nigel P. Short and Lydia Turner acknowledge this connection in their introduction to *Contemporary British Autoethnography*, stating that "an important function of autoethnography is to expose 'the elephants

⁴ My struggle with bulimia (detailed in this thesis) certainly constitutes "traumatic" subject matter. That being said, I resist the autoethnographic urge to detail only what is painful, but use the material as a means to a comedic end.

in the room' of cultural context: social and organisational practices which beg robust scrutiny and critique but which are taken for granted as unquestioned, normative 'business as usual'" (2013, 5). Essentially, I envisage autoethnography as a kind of trickster hermeneutics, the kind that raises more questions than it answers, the kind discussed by academic trickster extraordinaire, Gerald Vizenor who, in response to a question about the possibility of a "trickster university," implies that such a university would involve lecturers who "speak about how they got to their ideas, rather than how their ideas are represented as some treasure of authority" (Vizenor and Lee 1999, 127).

THE PROCESS

My autoethnographic journey began, in some sense, long before I had settled on autoethnography as my chosen methodology. In qualitative research, one often relates the focus of their investigation to one's own life experiences, whether or not they are consciously aware of this process. This was particularly the case for me as I tend towards introspection (a kinder term than navel-gazing). In other words, given that my research was broadly about the subversive potential of humour, I had already begun the autoethnographic process of reflecting on humorous instances (what I later viewed as "data") from my own life before I was aware that this process had a name. The circuitous path my research journey took is summed up by Muncey in the following statement:

I kept returning to the notion that [autoethnography] somehow emerges out of the iterative process of doing research, while engaging in the process of living a life. I rarely come across people who set out to do autoethnography but I do rather meet many people who resort to it as a means of getting across intangible and complex feelings and experiences that somehow can't be told in conventional ways, or because the literature they are reading is not telling their story (2010, 2-3).

The data collection process was similarly unsystematic. I initially drew on the more obvious sources of personal information such as diaries and memories, but in the process of doing so, and in conjunction with my examination of the material, other ideas for data became apparent. As Chang states: "Data analysis begins while data collection is still in progress, and analysis facilitates the collection of more relevant and meaningful data" (2016, 61-62). This led to my drawing on less conventional artefacts – a collection of driver's licence photographs I had taken over the last decade, for example – as well as reflecting on humorous events or instances of humour which were concurrent with the research and writing process. What eventually emerged was an eclectic set of data from both the past and continuous present, something akin to Muncey's collection of "snapshots, metaphors, artifacts, and journeys [which] makeup a patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions, and behaviors" (2005, 84).

In tandem with my expanding body of research, I realised that several instances of humour or humorous events detailed in the data gathered thus far displayed aspects of the carnivalesque. From that point onwards, my focus shifted, and I narrowed my search to those data which had about them something of the carnivalesque, even if humour was not always front and centre. I also kept note of reoccurring themes or issues, regardless of whether or not they evidenced the carnivalesque. Concerns such as body image, for example, or the difficulties and uncertainties related to my Christian faith, appeared frequently in journal and diary entries, and were revisited later as I began to see their possible links with carnival and my emergent “guiding questions.”

There is a reason so many autoethnographers rely on the metaphor of a “journey” when explaining their research process. Part of the challenge of providing a breakdown of the autoethnographic process is that much of the data emerges in “real time,” or during the course of research and writing itself. As such, attempts to outline the process can seem somewhat unsystematic, even muddled. There is no clear or linear path when composing an autoethnography. There is, rather, a series of false starts, multiple changes of direction, and myriad reconfigurations. This is less a sign of failure or poor methodological technique than it is an inherent feature of autoethnography, a process which, as Chang notes, “defies a rigid and linear model of research design” (2016, 62).

All in a Day's Work



(Fig. 2)

I lost my job a few years ago. I wasn't fired per se, but my contract wasn't renewed, which is really just a convenient way of sacking a person without creating too much fuss, a bit like the employee who's given the "option" of leaving with a baby Glock pressed into the small of his back. I was bad at my job – there's no denying it. If I'd been in charge I probably would have fired me too. For a start, I'd been working there for a year before I realised exactly what my job *was*. It's a long story, but basically, the advertisement was pulled shortly after I'd sent off my resume and since this was one amongst a number of jobs I'd applied for at the time, I'd completely forgotten the title of the job come interview, let alone my role in the company. It was too late to ask my boss exactly what my position entailed after being hired, so I bluffed my way through most of the year trying to remember what it was I'd said I could do in the interview.

No one ever really tells the truth in an interview: like a first date, the line between truth and reality gets a bit murky. You're on your best behaviour, highlighting all the stuff you're good at, and conveniently skimming over other crucial details, like the fact that you have herpes or chronic halitosis. *It's too much to tell them right now*, you reason, that you talk to yourself in the shower or eat expired blue vein because you figure it was off to begin with anyway. *No*, you think, *those are the kinds of revelations you save for just after the wedding, right after that bit in the vows about til' death do us*

part. You're even less transparent with the resume. To say that your credentials are merely buffed and polished is a gross understatement. I always end up looking mature, efficient and capable by the time I've finished – a sure sign I've been telling porkies. With the right amount of spin, any shortcoming can work in your favour. Observe:

Megan socialises when she's meant to be working / *Megan has strong interpersonal skills.*

Megan surfs the net most days / *Megan is computer literate.*

Megan disregards the instructions of superiors / *Megan shows initiative.*

In essence, the resume is just a string of white lies held together by a few legitimate facts like your address and date of birth. For me, the whole thing is one big attempt to cover up the fact that I'm woefully incompetent, unable to ever really fit in at a "traditional" workplace.

My first job, at the tender age of 14, was laying tables and washing dishes at a French restaurant. Whether or not I could claim (as I later did) "experience" in the industry is another matter considering that I quit the job after four hours. In hindsight, it probably wasn't that bad, but back then I spooked easily. I hadn't expected a place that looked so fancy at night – a place whose entrees alone, *even in 1998*, started at an alarming \$12 – to be so grotty behind the scenes. Odd smells emanated from the kitchen, and Jacques Pépin, alas, was nowhere to be found. His replacements, two slovenly looking fellows whose language was as dirty as their off-white double-breasted jackets grunted hello when they met me before returning to their discussion on whether or not pick up lines worked, and if not, how else were you meant to meet women nowadays?

No toque blanche for these fellows. No, they relied on hairnets to stop their greasy tresses from falling in the Bouillabaisse. The boss was even worse: a relentless task master with greying hair and a permanently furrowed brow, he was constantly nagging me about one thing or another: "Please could you help with the dishes?" he'd say, gesturing in the direction of a stack of dirty pots and pans, or, "are you back from lunch break yet? It's been over an hour!"

There was also the problem of following instructions. One day, I imagine, I will know how to lay a table correctly, but until that day I'll be content with knowing that your fork goes on the left and your knife, the right. At the French restaurant, there were a variety of plates and bowls, and around those plates and bowls a constellation of utensils, differing in shape and size. *What the hell was the difference between a teaspoon and a dessert spoon?* I thought, looking at my distorted reflection in the silverware, *and for Pete's sake, why couldn't we call it a cup instead of a "water goblet?"*

Despite the brevity of my stay, I returned the next day to collect my \$16 pay. *And why not?* I thought, I had, after all, been a valuable employee for four entire hours. When the boss looked at me,

incredulous, shaking his head, I struggled to understand his frustration. Sure, requesting long service leave might be pushing it, but claiming reimbursement for 240 squandered minutes of my precious youth was a God-given right.

Several years later, my harrowing experience as a kitchen hand finally behind me, I got a job at electrical giant *Harvey Norman*, whose "Hardly Normal!" sales were so good they consumed the majority of my paycheque. The pay had gone up from the \$4 an hour I received at the French restaurant, but not by much, and for my nine months or so of labour, I was compensated with a five-stack compact disc player, a phone the size of a brick and little else.

It was on to bigger and better things my first year out of high school, though. Through a friend of a friend I got a job slash traineeship at an employment agency answering phones and making coffees and performing other office dogsbody duties. Probably the most useful thing I learnt during my time there, however, was non-admin-related. Showing an aptitude elsewhere lacking, I mastered the age-old art of rolling a perfectly proportioned, expertly-crafted cigarette. My teacher, a wonderful Irish woman named Grainne, would look me square in the eye each time I'd completed my task and lecture me on the dangers of smoking. "Don't ever touch these, kid," she'd rasp – "they'll kill you." Then she'd examine the cigarette for imperfections – "it's still a bit too tapered at the filter end," she'd say, holding it up to the light and squinting, "and a tad puckered on the fold line."

My current bosses, I figured, weren't that good at their job. Their whole brief, after all, was to find the right person for the right workplace, and yet somehow I had slipped through the net. Apart from rolling a decent cigarette, the only other job I was good at was shredding. A good thirty minutes would go by as I destroyed swathes of classified information and wondered when exactly, and in what universe, I would be an asset to the company.

My year of training completed, armed with a Cert Two under my belt – *is that even a qualification?* I hear you ask – I got a job at a car detailing company manning the phones and allocating various jobs to their most suitably-located employee. I should have known that this was not the job for me – I barely know my left from my right, let alone how to read a map – but I liked barking orders at subordinates from my chair in a remote office in Kewdale, and most of all, I enjoyed wearing a headset, because it made me feel as though I was part of something important, something more than washing cars. Eventually, though, I realised that I needed to be fired. Even worse, I would have to do the firing. Whenever I confused opposite ends of the map (Balcatta with Booragoon, Hamersley with High Wycombe, Forrestfield with Fremantle) my exceedingly patient boss would say "that's ok, you're still learning." When the same thing kept happening a year in, there was little left to say. We had both run out of excuses for my incompetence. His was a look I had seen many times before, the look that says *is she all there?* When I told him I was quitting, he pretended to look disappointed. "Well, uh... well," he

said, searching desperately for the right words, "well, it's certainly never been boring."

In between that job and several others, I had been completing an Arts degree. Here, I excelled – here with every High Distinction, I was able to forget for a moment how dismally I performed in the "real" world. On completion, I did what every other Arts Graduate does and enrolled in teaching. *Those who can, do; those who can't, teach*, or so the saying goes, and no one, I figured, did *can't* better than me. I would mix it up a bit, though – teach English as a *second* language, because why set the bar too high? That way, I thought, if I made a complete mess of the curriculum, my employers would be none the wiser. Thanks to my inferior teaching, the students would be unable to voice their complaints.

"Teacher, she well, she be, she, how I put...?" one of my students might say, searching for a suitable word. And the Head of School would nod encouragingly.

"She *is* very good, Miho, not she *be* very good."

I enrolled in an intensive month-long course and thrived. So much so that I was hired by the same teaching institution. *This is it*, I thought. I would be Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* and kids would be saying "Oh captain my captain" and I would spend half of my day telling them to get down off their desks. "It's really not necessary," I'd say. "I already know I have your unfailing loyalty and allegiance." Sadly, however, things went downhill once the rubber hit the road. With only four weeks training under my belt, I was thrown into the proverbial deep end. I knew this because they told me repeatedly that I would be "thrown into the deep end," as though this somehow made the prospect less daunting. If I expressed any concerns or asked fellow teachers for help, they would just smile a knowing smile and say, "you'll learn."

How little they knew me. The problem was that while my own English was excellent, I had learned nothing about the actual mechanics of the language. I soon found out that anything I knew about my mother tongue I knew intuitively. This was a problem of course, when it came to teaching grammar. In lieu of actual answers, I became a master of deflection: "Now now Mai-Linh," I'd say, patting a confused Asian woman on the shoulder, "don't you trouble your pretty head about gerunds." When Manuel asked me how to change the verb 'to be' into an imperative, I'd check my watch and say "is it break time, already? Get out of here you crazy kids."

And then there was *that* day – the day one of my students yawned. A huge, gaping, semi-audible yawn. In one fell swoop, what little confidence I had was dashed. *Was I boring? Was this class a drag for my students?* I was horrified – convinced that I had become *that teacher*. They probably skipped out of my class, I thought, laughing with each other in Japanese or Spanish or whatever language it was they spoke. In the break, I rang my mother and sister (both teachers) to tell them that while I'd always thought that they were underworked and overpaid, I was wrong. This was a tough gig. I quit soon afterwards, unable to cope with the trauma of the event.

Weeks later, the school sent me a note written by some of my students – a petition, of sorts, to get me back. Perhaps it worked differently back in their country, I thought, but employers in Australia were reluctant to rehire workers who, without any forewarning, called it quits, undone by a yawn. The letter had *Hello Kitty* stickers on it, and an unflattering picture of what I assumed was me teaching the class. *Is my belly really that rotund*, I thought, *my thighs that chunky?* "We like Miss Green much," the note said, in a heart-shaped outline. "She good to us and funny, too." It was touching and all, but simply served as further evidence of my second-rate tutelage – their grammar was atrocious. And if they liked me so much, I wondered, why had someone yawned? WHY THE HELL HAD SOMEONE YAWNED?!!!

From there, it was on to a job at a university, the last in a long string of failed attempts to find my "calling." *Maybe this is finally it*, I reckoned. *After all, haven't I always flourished in an academic environment?* Sadly, I soon saw this for the logical misstep it was, as irrational as assuming you'd be an excellent bank teller because you enjoy spending money. Even with a role requiring little more than the ability to log admissions, answer the phone and organise the odd event, I was once again found wanting.

"You're just a Leo the Late Bloomer," my mum would say, when I opined about my less than illustrious track record, "you just haven't found the right job yet." Leo the Late Bloomer, it turned out, was a children's book from the 1970s that tells the tale of a pathetic, incompetent lion, who despite his mental retardation eventually succeeds. I wasn't sure how I felt about the comparison.

In between shuffling papers around on my desk and aligning my pens and paperclips into orderly lines, I would spend my days as a Student Services Assistant on Reddit asking questions like *if there's no wind on the moon, why did the flag wave in the Apollo landing photo?* or *In the case of an emergency, can you really drink your own urine?* There was literally – and I use this word sparingly – nothing for me to do but sit there and look efficient all day, which, as every incompetent employee knows, is much harder than actually *being* efficient. The charade went on for two years before this conversation or something similar to it presumably took place:

Head of School: We've got to cut back. Who's expendable?

Subordinate: I'm pretty sure that girl at the front desk hasn't done anything for the last two years.

Head of School: What girl at the front desk?

The worst thing about losing my job, though, worse than the actual firing itself, was trying to come up with a glam reason for leaving. No one, especially in my case, was going to believe I'd been poached by another company, but I figured that if I kept it realistic and vaguely mysterious, everyone who was still employed would wish they weren't. Unfortunately, the last few people who'd left before me had

impressive reasons for going. All I had was a dearth of practical skills, no common sense and a Humanities Degree that had Centrelink's contact details on the bottom of the testamur.

Embarrassment aside, my dismissal was probably the best thing that could have happened to me: it was truly exhausting doing nothing. If anybody tries to whinge to me now about looming deadlines, difficult clients, awful bosses and the like, I'll say "pffft, come back to me when you've been so bored you've googled *cats that look like Hitler*. Then we can talk pain."

CRITERIA

Considering the subjective nature of autoethnographic writing, as well as the proliferation of expressions to be found under the umbrella term “autoethnography,” practitioners and assessors have found it difficult to agree on a set of evaluative criteria. This criteriological dilemma is implied in Stacey Holman Jones’ description of autoethnography as a “blurred genre” (2005, 765) encompassing a range of different practices from fields as diverse as journalism and literary criticism, through to psychology, anthropology and sociology.⁵ For some, emphasis has rested on autoethnography’s political or affective reach. Jones, for example, discusses the personal text as “critical intervention in social, political, and cultural life” (2005, 763). She also focusses on its ability to elicit an emotional response from readers, describing the way autoethnography can “move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners” and produce “charged moments of clarity, connection, and change” (2005, 764).

In *Analytic Autoethnography*, Anderson veers away from the reader’s emotional reaction to the work, stating that analytic ethnography’s purpose is “not simply to document personal experience, to provide an ‘insider’s perspective,’ or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader” (2006, 386-387). Rather, he posits that “unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well” (2006, 386). Ellis and Bochner, like Jones, emphasise the emotive or affective aspect of autoethnography, a trait which they claim distinguishes autoethnography from other more conservative or traditional modes of ethnographic research. In *Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography*, Bochner responds to Anderson’s call for a more “analytical” autoethnography by claiming that his approach is reductive, and attempts to “bring [autoethnography] under the control of reason, logic, and analysis” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 433). In a similar vein, Ellis emphasises that she wants people to “feel the story in their guts, not just know the ‘facts’ in their heads” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, 435). Similarly, Norman Denzin suggests that Anderson and his contemporaries have attempted to drag autoethnography back into an older, traditional framework, one that does not recognise the “messy,” “vulnerable” and essentially heartfelt nature of such writing (2006, 422-423).

Many of the difficulties facing assessors of autoethnographic research, it should be noted, are shared by assessors *in general* in the wake of a postmodernity. As Laurel Richardson asserts, “postmodernism

⁵ Here Jones is indebted to Clifford Geertz and his 1983 essay *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*. Geertz’s influential essay discusses the emergence of new forms which challenged traditional positivist paradigms as well as interdisciplinary distinctions between fields such as the humanities and social sciences. He states: “The recourse to the humanities for explanatory analogies in the social sciences is at once evidence of the destabilization of genres and the rise of ‘the interpretive turn.’” (23).

awakens us to the problematics of collecting and reporting ‘data,’ and challenges disciplinary rules and boundaries on ethical, aesthetic, theoretical, and empirical grounds” (2000, 253). In a later article John Freeman phrases it thus: “in standard research practice there is no longer the illusion of absolute methodological certainty” (2015, 920). In other words, no research can be said to be performed from a bedrock of complete objectivity – it is always culturally, socially and politically contingent. The pursuit of “truth” or fixed, immutable conclusions is problematic, as Thomas Schwandt notes in *Farewell to Criteriology*. A key teaching of “postfoundational epistemology,” he asserts, is “that we must learn to live with uncertainty, with the absence of final vindications, without the hope of solutions in the form of epistemological guarantees. Contingency, fallibilism, dialogue, and deliberation mark our way of being in the world” (1996, 59).

Despite the fact that epistemological uncertainty underpins all of our research efforts, some framework through which we can assess the quality of our undertakings must be sought. Schwandt goes on to acknowledge this when he cautions that while a lack of “final convergence” or ultimate “resolution” might exist, it “does not translate into anything goes and obviate the necessity of our taking a stand on what it is right to do and good to be as social inquirers” (1996, 59). *So what criteria is one to use?* Bochner discusses a reluctance to even utilise the term “criteria,” suggesting that “the demand for criteria reflects the desire to contain freedom, limit possibilities, and resist change” (2000, 266). Following Bochner, I reject the notion of a rigid set of guidelines for assessing the autoethnographic work (a pursuit that I believe is not only limiting but potentially counterproductive). Instead, I look at some of the qualities attributed to autoethnography by various researchers and practitioners in the field, creating a broad outline or picture of what an autoethnographic work of value should look like – an outline that I returned to frequently over the course of writing this thesis.

Firstly, and perhaps most pertinently given that this is a PhD in creative writing, I wanted to make sure that the writing itself was of a sufficiently high standard. No appeal to subjectivity can whitewash a shoddy piece of writing, and I agree with Ellis that plot, the proper development of characters, the use of vivid imagery, sufficient editing and creative flair all undergird good autoethnographic writing (2000, 275). As Denzin notes, “experimental writing” (of the kind employed by autoethnographers) “must be well-crafted, engaging writing capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as by social scientists” (1997, 200).

Secondly, I wanted the reader to feel emotionally involved in the stories I had created. While resisting the term “criteria,” per se, Bochner outlines the beginning of his evaluative process of an autoethnographic work as follows:

First, I look for abundant, concrete detail; concern not only for the commonplace, even trivial routines of everyday life, but also for the flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies; not only facts but also feelings (2000, 270).

In other words, he wants the work to be grounded in the everyday while also having a visceral quality, producing verisimilitude through those "flesh and blood emotions" one encounters in the process of negotiating life. Interrelatedly, I wanted the writing to elicit a relational transaction of the kind outlined by Harold Lloyd Goodall, Jr. when he suggests that

good autoethnography strives to use *relational* language and styles to create purposeful *dialogue* between the reader and the author. This dialogue proceeds through close, personal identification—and recognition of difference—of the reader's experiences, thoughts, and emotions with those of the author" (as quoted in Spry 2001, 713).

Thirdly, I wanted the work to have significance and to contribute to the existing body of humour research. In keeping with Dwight Conquergood's assertion that "theory is enlivened and most rigorously tested when it hits the ground in practice" (1995, 139), I believe that one of the strongest aspects of this thesis is that much of its insight comes from a "living out" of the theories herein investigated.

While research on the subversive nature of humour (particularly carnivalesque humour) has been undertaken by myriad scholars, its context within the particularities of my own life provides novel insights that might not be found in more traditional modes of research. Accordingly, while the thesis may not result in a series of facts or assertions, it does pose unique questions (as well as offering some tentative answers). This is the kind of autoethnographic dialogue favoured by Ellis, who advocates "opening up rather than closing down conversation" (Ellis 2004, 22).

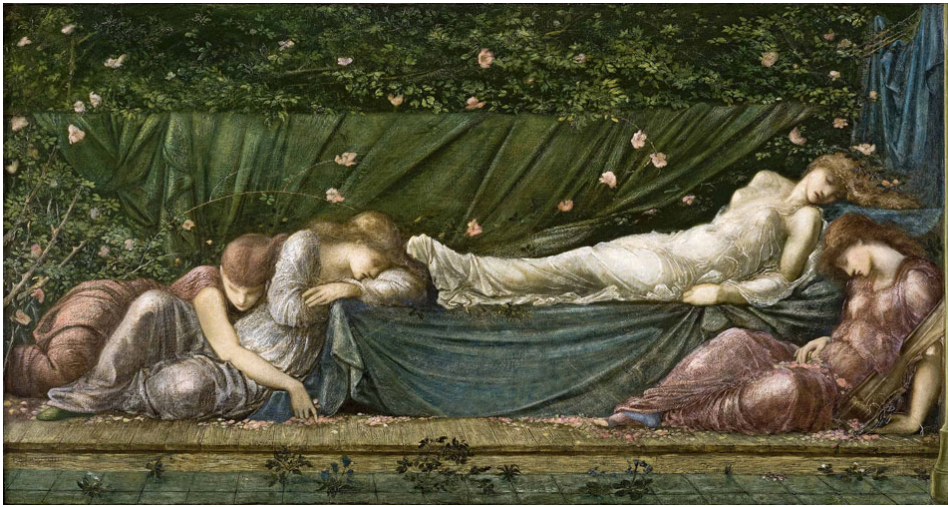
Creating an autoethnographic work of value also involved addressing (and attempting to avoid) some of the criticisms levelled against autoethnography, one of the most prevalent being that it veers towards self-indulgence or narcissism, where "texts are not 'doing' ethnography at all, but are self-indulgent writings published under the guise of social research and ethnography" (Coffey 1999, 155). I also wanted to ensure that in challenging the tyranny of objectivism, I didn't express my opinions so loudly, or with such conclusiveness, that other voices were silenced in the process, "simply replacing one privileged center with another; making similarly narrow claims to truth, authority, and authenticity as objectivism" (Jackson and Mazzei 2008, 299).

Lastly, throughout the process of writing this thesis, I reminded myself that autoethnography is executed best when it combines the more analytical aspect of research with the creative, emotive,

and potentially radical, undertaking both “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall” (Sparkes 2002, 210). In short, I concur with Richardson’s observation that “creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified” (2000, 254).

With this in mind, I began my autoethnographic journey.

Losing Sleep



(Fig. 3)

Have you tried eating a banana before bedtime?

Yes.

Or drinking a glass of milk? Both of them contain tryptophan, which –

I've done that, too.

And you exercise regularly?

Yep.

My doctor pauses, then takes one last, comical, stab in the dark.

How about counting sheep?

Growing up, if you needed something, anything, in the middle of the night, dad was your go-to guy. We would come to him, us kids, with complaints of a sore throat or headache, when we were in need of a back rub or some soothing words while we heaved our guts into the toilet bowl. Dad, we figured, had nothing better to do in the middle of the night – he wasn't sleeping, after all.

For a long time, I was afraid of the dark. Not afraid of the dark, per se – *is anyone?* – but afraid of what lurked beneath the necessary absence of light. Under the cover of darkness, familiar objects took on a sinister quality. Who knew whom, or *what*, for that matter, the kitchen cupboard was hiding, the terror that potentially lay in wait behind a closed door or beneath our dining table? The hum of the refrigerator was ominous, seemingly louder than it had ever been in daylight. It would provide, I

imagined, the soundtrack to my slaughter or abduction. *She was a nice girl*, they'd say at my funeral. *Bit too old to be afraid of the dark, but a nice girl, nonetheless.*

Rather than make the fraught Zam journey to the toilet alone, I required an escort, someone who could at least report back to base should I be taken. *We should've trusted her instincts*, my parents would say, weeping and wringing their hands. *She warned us this would happen.* (In the event of my death, I figured, I could at least have the delicious satisfaction of one last, posthumous *I told you so.*) My older sister was my first port of call, having once experienced similar reservations. I would feel my way to her bed, hands out in front of me patting the air, groping around for a leg or a shoulder to shake to rouse her from her sleep. "Sarah," I'd whisper, careful not to wake my other sister, "Sez, I have to go to the loo." Later on, though, her own fears having dissipated, she was less inclined to perform the duty of night-time chaperone. "Can't you just go without me?" she mumbled one evening, rolling away from me and sighing, "it's really not that far." I yanked my new blue and white striped dressing gown tighter around me. This, I realised, had been a strictly *quid pro quo* arrangement.

"Don't bother" I snapped, when she suggested staying and counting until I got back, "I'd hate for you to trouble yourself."

Instead, it was on to the next bedroom – a perilous journey in itself – to rouse my dad. Invariably, he was already awake. "Yes?" he'd ask into the darkness, as the door creaked open. For a person as sleep-deprived as he, dad always seemed surprisingly upbeat, if a little ragged round the edges. "One sec," he'd say, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and reaching for his Ugg boots. My mum would rarely wake, not when I came to rouse dad, and neither, by all accounts, when he got back. Instead, she would sleep on, slowly but surely perfecting her impersonation of a chainsaw. Years later, I had the misfortune of sharing a tent with her on a family camping holiday in Coral Bay. *The man must have had the patience of a saint*, I'd think, as the freight train of her snoring rumbled past me and out, through the flywire flap, into the balmy night air.

At the height of my insomnia, dad's relative cheerfulness came back to haunt me. *How did he do it?* I thought. *How did he manage to be a fully-functioning person come morning?* In winter, this meant that the fire was lit, porridge was cooked, and fresh orange juice was squeezed, and all before the first of us had emerged from our glorious cocoons. I, on the other hand, was an absolute wreck without adequate rest. When deprived of sleep, I turned into the worst version of myself – a trash-talking, one-syllable, barely-operative entity. If the apocalypse came, I thought, I'd do alright. With a bit of grunting and twitching, the zombies would mistake me for one of their own.

While my sleep routine was never great, not even as a kid, it wasn't that bad either. Not as bad as my dad's. I might not always get a full forty winks, but I'd usually manage at least twenty. Then out of seemingly nowhere, at the age of 24, insomnia struck. For it to manifest suddenly was not unusual,

but at the time, it terrified me. There was a rare but fatal disease, I found out from trawling the internet late one night, called *fatal familial insomnia*, the onset of which could occur later in life. Some Egyptian guy in the Netherlands apparently came in at 57 complaining of insomnia and was dead within the year. *Is this my fate, also?* I wondered. *And if so, will it even be that bad?*

I was prescribed Xanax on the proviso that it was a temporary measure. I assumed that something that came with a doctor's prescription, pages of instructions and a plethora of scary potential side effects would be effective, but it did little more than lull me into a light surface stupor from which I'd resurface feeling even more tired. Other measures were equally ineffectual. Eating bananas or drinking milk, it turned out, were little match for a body committed to staying up, neither were the well-intentioned mixture of homespun advice and old wives' tales dispensed by well-meaning friends and, on some occasions, medical professionals. St John's Worts, cognitive therapy, making my bedroom a "haven" (whatever that means), as well as simply "trying a bit harder" were all offered as cures. *No number of herbal supplements or positive thinking*, I thought, *are going to touch this*, resigning myself to yet another night of staring up at my ceiling, praying for a visit from the Sandman.



(Fig. 4) *Nice for some.*

For the record, counting sheep is pointless for someone with an active imagination. People with an active imagination, after all, are prone to elaborating on a storyline – committed to developing the plot. *Who are these sheep that simply jump over stiles all day?* I thought, *and where do they go afterwards?* I followed sheep 243, a lovely little Norwegian number with a mottled black and white face, past the crooked wooden stile and down into rolling verdure. Her name was Gunhild, and over the ensuing hour I chronicled her short, and ultimately tragic, life: here she was chewing on grass, there she was getting

shorn – *that reminds me, I need a new pair of Ugg boots – the long ones, not the ones that end at your ankle* – here she was giving birth to a litter of lambs. From there, stuff got pretty dark. Gunhild, it turned out, was slaughterhouse-bound, despite at one stage being a beloved family pet. Six-year-old Bjorn wept and pleaded with his father, but to no avail – it was off to the abattoir for the only real friend he had ever had. The next I saw of Gunhild (I blanked out for the bloody bits) she was a mass of mutton rolling off a rubber conveyor belt into Styrofoam trays. *It's hardly the kind of stuff to knock you off.*

Despite not getting any actual REM sleep during my bout of insomnia, I managed to secrete an excessive amount of dribble. This seemed like the final injustice – dribbling, after all, was the sorry side-effect of sleeping. *And sleeping well.* It was a slap in the face to get a sodden pillowslip without any of the glorious, falling-headlong-into-a-well kind of slumber that usually accompanies it.

During this period, I came up with novel ways to combat my nightly boredom. Sometimes I would write, and when I wrote late at night it was almost guaranteed to be rubbish. Like *rubbish* rubbish. Like bargain bin, roadhouse-worthy, penny dreadful pulp. The odd thing was that it was so good while I was reading it. One poem, I reasoned, which had the words *Technicalour* and *anorak* in the same sentence, would propel me to literary stardom, potentially overnight. I made my sister pass it on to my old English teacher who she worked with at the time to show her the kind of talent she had birthed. I never heard back.

Watching infomercials was another fruitful time-waster. During the day, I could easily see through the teleprompted celebrity endorsements and doctored photos, but at 3am my frontal lobe, along with everyone else in the house, was fast asleep. I watched with delight as gleaming *Yoshi* blades glided through aluminium cans and planks of wood; waited, breathlessly, as the *Hurricane Spin Scrubber* transformed what was formerly a crackhouse into a gleaming palace. Each advertisement brought with it radical transformation. Wrinkles and crow's feet, as if by magic, disappeared – jawlines were tightened, as were butts, busts and thighs. "So pick up the phone why don't you?!" a thin, attractive woman would exclaim, her hand resting on a nearby telephone, "and join the countless others who've said goodbye to unsightly cellulite."

"Not bad for six recurring payments of \$29.95, GST included," I'd mumble to myself, eyelids drooping, body splayed the length of the couch. "Not bad at all."

Most entertaining, though, were the ads for diet pills and shakes which promised, among other things, swift and dramatic weight loss. "After only two weeks, I'm 50 pounds lighter, and *so much* happier," said Janine from Orlando, Florida, shimmying her whole body into one leg of an old pair of jeans, or standing, hand on hip, next to a miserable looking picture of herself pre-Fat Blaster 5000. As if the humiliation of being placed alongside her current iteration was not enough, in many of these ads

"before" woman (snapped in the act of eating or reclining or – God forbid – both) might dissolve into the white background in a mass of pixels, or be obscured by a large red cross which descended over the photo, as though to banish even the memory of her former fatty self.

I knew I'd hit rock bottom when I actually ordered something from an infomercial shortly after – a six month supply of ProActiv skincare as used by the likes of Britney Spears, Puff Daddy and some other celebrity whose face I couldn't place. *I have officially joined the ranks of the mentally unhinged*, I thought, relaying my bank details to a softly spoken Indian man at 3 am in the morning. *This is how it starts*. Regret arrived in the post a few weeks later in the form of three innocuous bottles containing what I eventually identified as Domestos. Sure, I got rid of some pimples, but I also lost a layer of skin I was quite fond of. *Why oh why hadn't I got the Fatblaster 5000 instead?* I thought, dolefully, rubbing aloe vera gel into the denuded region around my chin. *Or at least pushed for a free set of steak knives?!*

I never found out what caused my insomnia; how or why it lasted so long. It vanished after about nine months, as swiftly and wordlessly as it had first appeared. "I had a good sleep," I said to my mum one morning, thinking how innocuous those words might sound to the uninitiated. How glorious they sounded to me.

"Good," she said.

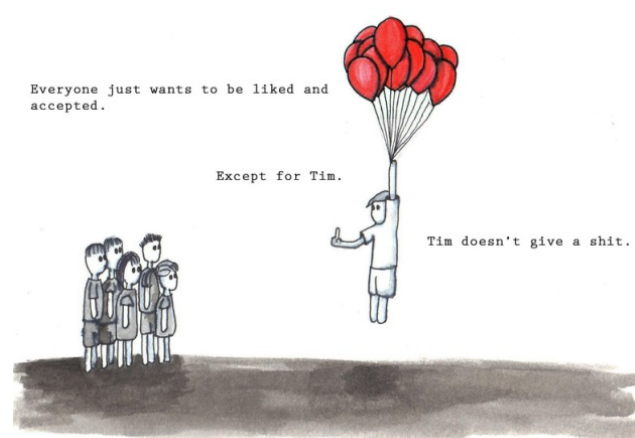
The same thing happened the next night. And the night after that.

Sleep, I'm now convinced, is what separates us from the animals. (Or at least from buying shit in the middle of the night.) There's a reason, after all, that depriving someone of it is considered a form of torture. And it's probably the worst kind, too. At least after a round of waterboarding, the rack, you name it, you can sleep it off – awake, reinvigorated, for the next round. *Tooth extraction? Bamboo shoots? Castration?* They're a walk in the park after a solid eight-hour sleep.

SOME DEFINITIONS

In order to examine my claim of having used carnivalesque humour to undermine certain instances of “cultural conformity” and “stereotyping,” I believe that it is important to narrow these broad (and often nebulous) terms further, clarifying exactly what is meant in each instance of their usage in this thesis. Accordingly, the following section is devoted to providing a brief working definition for both terms.

CULTURAL CONFORMITY



(Fig. 5)

In 1871, in one of the earliest and most oft-cited definitions of the term, British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor noted of culture that it is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (as quoted in McCurdy 2012, 2). By the next century, a variety of definitions had been offered, each of them carrying slightly different shades of meaning. In an influential 1952 work by anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, the authors identify over 160 definitions of the term “culture.” While “avoiding a new formal definition” themselves, they nonetheless suggest as part of their summation that “the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (181).

The sheer volume of definitions provided by Kroeber and Kluckhohn highlights the difficulty of defining a term as broad and variable as culture. As Robert Borofsky notes in his introduction to the co-written article *WHEN: A Conversation about Culture*, despite it being referenced continually in a wide range of literature, culture “is not a set term—some natural phenomena that one can consensually describe” (Borofsky et al. 2001, 433). He goes on to note:

The cultural concept has probably never been defined in terms that all anthropologists, now and/or in the past, concur on. . . . This disjunction of meanings might be said to be the concept's most enduring disciplinary characteristic (2001, 433).

What *can* be said to unite theorists on the matter, however, and what has “revolutionized anthropological inquiry in the past decades” is the “reflexive insight that ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are inevitably clouded by cultural or personal bias” (Kostick 2008, 12).

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz discusses the move away from the Enlightenment notion of an immutable, inherent human essence where man was viewed “as regularly organized, as thoroughly invariant, and as marvelously simple as Newton’s universe” (1973, 34) to the more complex interrelationship between an individual and their culture. Geertz states:

Whatever else modern anthropology asserts—and it seems to have asserted almost everything at one time or another—it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist (1973, 35).

In other words, nobody exists untouched by the culture in which they live. As Edward Sapir notes, the ethnologist or culture-historian’s understanding of “culture” positions it as “coterminous with man himself” (1924, 402).

Ying-yi Hong notes that culture can often falsely be conflated with racial or ethnic groups and frames culture, instead, as “*networks of knowledge*, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world” (2009, 4). The idea of a “knowledge network” is useful for this thesis, especially since it removes connotations of race or ethnicity from the term culture. However, since one of the foci of this thesis is the way that carnivalesque humour can be used to undermine cultural *conformity*, I required a definition which would also make explicit reference to the substantial power that culture exerts over individuals. Such is expressed by Melissa J. Williams and Julie Spencer-Rodgers in the following summation from their article, *Culture and Stereotyping Processes*:

In the psychological literature, most recent definitions of *culture* characterize it as a set of shared meanings and practices that are transmitted, communicated, and reinforced among members of a cultural group, and that, in turn, influence the values, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of their members (2010, 591).

The degree to which culture acts as a constitutive force is debated across a range of disciplines. In *Cultures and Selves*, Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama describe the way that individuals and

their surrounding cultures are engaged in what they call “an ongoing cycle of mutual constitution” (2010, 420). The question of whether individuals are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to follow cultural dictates is similarly contested. Roy G. D’Andrade places emphasis on the former when he suggests that

the goals stipulated in the cultural meaning system are intrinsically rewarding; that is, through the process of socialization, individuals come to find achieving culturally prescribed goals and following cultural directives to be motivationally satisfying and to find not achieving such goals or following such directives to be anxiety producing (1984, 98).

To what degree individuals find not achieving “cultural directives” “anxiety-producing” only inasmuch as failure to adhere to these directives results in a form of social estrangement is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, my focus is directed towards those aspects of cultural conformity which are patently unhelpful or detrimental and, on a more optimistic note, highlight the possibility of resistance through humorous acts of subversion.

STEREOTYPING



(Fig. 6)

Any analysis of stereotyping contains within it an examination of culture. Stereotypes are, after all, informed by and perpetuated within societies and specific cultural contexts. M. J. Williams and Spencer-Rodgers note the “close theoretical ties between the stereotyping and culture literatures,” stating:

the study of culture and the study of stereotyping are fundamentally and inherently linked, as culture is the vehicle through which stereotypic knowledge is transferred within a society and across generations (2010, 592).

In *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, David J. Schneider discusses the fact that reactions towards the term “stereotyping” are generally negative. He argues, however, that not all usage of stereotypes is undesirable, and that they are, in fact, reflections of the fact that humans possess the ability to generalise, an important heuristic tool for navigating the complexities of our world. He states: “To give up our capacity to form stereotypes, we would probably have to give up our capacity to generalize, and that is a trade none of us should be willing to make” (2004, 8). While stereotypes may indeed serve a practical function, they are also capable of perpetuating certain harmful myths or immutable notions about large groups of people, irrespective of conflicting data, a point that D.J. Schneider acknowledges when he says that “we need to consider the whens and whys of how our stereotypes create and support prejudice” (2004, 231). Again, the point of this thesis is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the degree to which stereotypes are either useful or harmful. Rather, it is to examine specific instances of stereotyping that I have encountered or observed in which the links to *negative* aspects of cultural conformity are particularly evident, and in which undermining the stereotype through carnivalesque humour simultaneously subverts such conformity.

DEFINING THE CARNIVALESQUE



(Fig. 7) Bruegel's *"The Fight between Carnival and Lent"* (1559).

CARNIVAL 101

In *Rabelais and His World*, literary theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin examines the "culture of folk humor" of the late-medieval early Renaissance period, particularly within the context of the medieval carnival, a period in which myriad role-reversals and social inversions took place as a result of the temporary suspension of rank and order (Bakhtin 1984, 10). During the carnival period, political and social status was thus effectively made redundant, with sanction given to mock hierarchical structures (including, but not limited to, king and clergy), enacting a "crowning/decrowning" which "express[ed] the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal" (Bakhtin 1994b, 124).

According to Bakhtin, carnival is a "world upside down" (1994b, 133) or "inside out" (1984, 11). It is a place where "ambivalent festive laughter . . . brings together oppositions, sublimates death and dispels the fear of death by bringing birth and death together" (Karimova 2010, 38). Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist note of carnival that it was a "minimally ritualized antiritual, a festive celebration of the other, the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies" (1984, 300). *Rabelais and His World*, however, is not limited to simply describing a historical phenomenon. Instead, Bakhtin derives from this festive period

a theory of the “carnavalesque” which signifies both a literary mode and an approach to life which channels the subversive, playful and regenerative power of the carnival. Bakhtin states: “the basic carnival nucleus of this [folk] culture. . . . Belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, *it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain sense of play*” (1984, 7, emphasis mine).

Carnival, according to Bakhtin, is “organized on the basis of laughter” (1984, 8), and the “influence of the carnival spirit . . . made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect” (1984, 13). This laughter, however, is of a distinct kind, communal and inclusive. Carnival, as John Lechte notes, is not “a spectacle to be observed, [but] the hilarity lived by everyone” (1994, 9). This focus on communal, rather than isolated, laughter, highlights another key feature of carnival, namely its ambivalence or “gay relativity” (Bakhtin 1984, 11). As opposed to the ridicule of one group or principle exclusively, Bakhtin asserts that the laughter of the carnival is “the laughter of all the people. . . . Universal in scope . . . directed at all and everyone, including the carnivals’ participants” (1984, 11).

Such ambivalence is embodied in the traditional fool, a key carnival figure who exposes the follies of the people but does not, in the process, exclude himself from the ridicule. Rather, he “mocks others’ uses of words by using them himself” (Hoy 1992, 770). In addition to the ambivalent *laughter* of the carnival, Bakhtin also discusses the “*joyful relativity* of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position” (1994b, 124). In this regard, the carnival is also ambivalent philosophically – while it toys with existing hierarchies, it does not topple one in order to reinstate another. As Bakhtin asserts: “Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture” (1984, 11).

THE GROTESQUE

Another key concept related to carnival is that of Bakhtin’s “grotesque” body, or what he terms the “material bodily lower stratum” (1984, 378). Profoundly ambivalent in nature, the grotesque body embraces the collective, as opposed to the individualised, and emphasises the cyclical nature of life and death. Bakhtin views the grotesque body as “deeply positive” (1984, 19) in that it negates the individualised body and embraces the *collective* body; that “jumble of protruberances and orifices: bellies, noses, breasts, buttocks, assorted genitalia, mouths, guts, and so on, in which what belongs to whom is both irrelevant and impossible to determine” (Jefferson 2001, 216). Bakhtin argues that depictions of the body in art and literature, however, begin to change in the Renaissance in such a way that any evidence of material or biological functions is eradicated, stating: “All signs of its

unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated. . . . The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown" (1984, 29). Similarly, the communal aspects of the body were suppressed, spawned by a "growing acceptance of the human individual as a discrete entity who could be seen as separate from 'the other'" (Kohl 1993, 145). Bakhtin views this shift as negative, valorising the work of French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais, whose novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* embodies both the carnival spirit and a "grotesque realism" whose "essential principle" is that of "degradation . . . the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 1984, 19-20).

Of the grotesque aesthetic, Bakhtin states: "The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (1984, 26). As such, the scatological features heavily in Rabelais' writing, along with images of copulating, eating and urinating. While this focus on what were considered to be the baser features or functions of the body meant that the grotesque was eventually "excluded from great literature . . . descended to the low comic level" due to the "domination of the classical canon" (Bakhtin 1984, 33), Bakhtin ascribes to Rabelais the following noble aspirations:

Rabelais' basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events. . . . He summoned all the resources of sober popular imagery in order to break up official lies and the narrow seriousness dictated by the ruling classes. Rabelais did not implicitly believe in what his time "said and imagined about itself"; he strove to disclose its true meaning for the people (1984, 439).

Bakhtin's contention, then, is that Rabelais' depiction of a body which negates "the static ideal represented in classical Greek marbles" (Clark and Holquist 1984, 303) is inherently subversive and ideologically counter-cultural due to the *symbolic* import of its representation. After all, there is a connection between the grotesque body, which "foregrounds the intertextuality of nature," and the carnival, which "enacts the intertextuality of ideologies, official and unofficial" (Clark and Holquist 304). Since the classical (official) body, in its closure, represents all that is fixed or "static," it is decidedly *anti-carnival*, divorcing itself from other bodies (read conflicting ideologies). The grotesque body, however, in its emphasis on the communal intermingling of bodies, on the process of death and birth which is common to all people, enacts a symbolic levelling:

The carnivalesque emphasis on the physical aspects of human existence, on things like sex and excrement and death, has great transgressive potential. These aspects of life are common to us all, male or female, white or black, capitalist or worker, king or peasant. As a result, they

reveal the basic commonality of human experience and the fundamental factitiousness of all systems of rationalization for the exclusion or oppression of particular marginal groups (Booker 1991, 13).

Lastly, the grotesque body not only points to this shared, communal aspect of humanity (thereby questioning social and political stratification), but highlights the cyclical nature of death and birth and the ultimately fictive notion of closure or finality. As Bakhtin notes: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (1984, 24).

CARNIVALIZED LANGUAGE



DIALOGISM

No exploration of carnival would be complete without examining Bakhtin’s interrelated concept of dialogism, a concept which “represents a lifetime’s commitment to seeing the self in the other” (Druick 2009, 296). The language of the carnival, according to Bakhtin, is essentially dialogic in nature, creating “new forms of speech” or rejuvenating older ones (1984, 16). He states: The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate (1984, 17). Bakhtin contrasts this “free and frank” speech that occurred within the carnival marketplace with the unifying, authoritarian features of monologic language, a language wherein “the matrix of ideological values, signifying practices, and creative

impulses which constitute the living reality of language are subordinated to the hegemony of a single, unified consciousness or perspective” (Gardiner 1992b, 26).

Bakhtin highlights the distinction between the monologic language of lyric poetry and the dialogic language utilised in forms such as the novel by asserting that lyric poetry is a form in which only the poet’s voice can be heard, thus making it the “pure and direct expression of [the poet’s] own intention” (1994a, 285). By contrast, the novel, which is dialogic and therefore “characterized by the presence of at least two distinct voices” (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, 25) marks a break from this monologic rule by being “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (Bakhtin DI, 261).⁶

In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky’s writing constitutes the greatest exemplar of the novel form because it allows for polyphony (a term he borrows from the musical world), whereby there exists a “*plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*” (1994b, 6). His analysis of the outcome of such polyphonic writing is detailed thus:

What unfolds in [Dostoevsky’s] works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event (1994b, 6).

Polyphony and dialogism are intimately connected. Caryl Emerson describes dialogism as polyphony’s “later offspring” (2000, 130), and both eschew the kind of hierarchical structuring which would give the author’s voice supremacy over other voices. Hence, Bakhtin’s preference for dialogism and the rationale behind his assertion that “*the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists*, in all its depth and specificity, cannot be reached through a monologic artistic approach” (1994b, 271).

According to Bakhtin, “the word lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (1994a, 284), and in this open-ended exchange between competing and conflicting voices, dialogic language becomes both a response to, and an anticipation of, further responses to the word:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming

⁶ Bakhtin’s views on this matter, it should be noted, are contested. As Peter Hühn and Roy Sommer observe, the “traditional view” that lyric poetry represents “unmediated,” “direct,” or “unfiltered” communication has been challenged by various narratologists (2014, 1: 421). Furthermore, in *A Theory of Narrative*, F.K. Stanzel asserts that many novels (amongst them, the earlier works of Dickens and Thackeray) exhibit a limited play of perspectives, or “aperspectivalism,” stating: “The novel and, to a lesser degree, the shorter narrative forms have constantly had to defend themselves against this tendency toward authorial essayistic writing” (1986, 11).

itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word (1994a, 280).

Not only does dialogic language or “living conversation” commune with both anticipated/future and past “words,” but it is also antithetical to the dialectical method wherein the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis ultimately culminate in some form of resolution. Bakhtin’s view on the deleterious effects of the dialectical process are enumerated thus in *Speech Genres*:

Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualising ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialectics (2010, 147).

Dialogue and the dialogic, on the other hand, are open-ended, eschewing finality or conclusion. In contrast to the dialectically-oriented mindset, Bakhtin claims that “*nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken*” (1994b, 166). Or as he phrases it elsewhere:

There is neither a first nor a last word and are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue (2010, 170).

The dialogic nature of language as expounded by Bakhtin has a direct correlation with carnival in that it is oriented in relation to the other, or “half-someone else’s” (1994a, 345), it is antihierarchical, “not at all a single, unitary language, inviolable and indisputable” (1994a, 295), and it is ultimately unfinalizable. Bakhtin’s understanding of the nature of language reflects his broader concept of the *self* as unfinalizable, and highlights the intimate connection between language and the construction of self. Links with the grotesque become similarly apparent when we realise that the interrelation and intermingling of bodies/persons that characterises the grotesque image finds its counterpart in a language which Bakhtin claims “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other” (1994a, 293).

HETEROGLOSSIA

Bakhtin further expands on the concept of dialogism by introducing the term heteroglossia or *raznorecie* (literally multi-speechedness), a feature of the novel and language which involves the

internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (1994a, 262-236).

He argues that within language there exists a variety of sub-languages which are class-specific and reflect “different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth” as well as the “languages of various epochs and periods” (1994a, 291). Language, according to Bakhtin, invariably operates in this manner. He notes that “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom” (1994a, 291).

In *Bakhtinian Thought*, Simon Dentith suggests that Bakhtin’s interpretation of language “sees it pulled in opposite directions . . . towards the unitary centre provided by a notion of a ‘national language’; and . . . towards the various languages which actually constitute the apparent but false unity of a national language” (1995, 35). Bakhtin describes this state of tension between the two forces as the tension between the “centripetal” and the “centrifugal,” between centre and periphery, stating: “Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (1994a, 272). On the one hand, centripetal forces create the notion of a fully integrated language, and yet the inherently heteroglot nature of language is such that the centrifugal forces shatter this ultimately illusory “unitary centre.”

As has been outlined here, the above concepts closely link language to carnival. Throughout this thesis I have included examples of humorous writing which I believe exemplify the carnivalesque (something Dentith refers to as “carnivalized writing”). Dentith defines such writing as that “which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings of carnival proper” (1995, 65). Ultimately, I argue for further connections with the carnivalesque not only through humorous acts, but through humorous writing which is both dialogic and heteroglot, which channels the carnival spirit by incorporating a multitude of voices, and which destabilises a unified, authorial centre.

My Cultural Capital is Bigger than Yours



(Fig. 9)

Hi Grace,

You might not remember me, but I met you at Jill Landers' party two weeks back – I was the one wearing the hessian scarf, stone-wash overalls and a shirt featuring the cast of *Hey Dad*. It was an outfit inspired by my late grandad, a humble wheat farmer whose earthy ensembles continue to influence my fashion sense. Anyway – *get to the point, Stephanie!!!* I'm actually emailing to ask you to help me settle a bet. My friend apparently overheard you referring to the whole getup as a bit too "now," but I insisted she misheard. Just hoping you could clear things up as I've got \$50 riding on this!

P.S. I couldn't stop ogling your fedora – where did you get it?

Yours enquiringly,

Stephanie!

Hi Stephanie,

I do remember you, and *that* shirt. What a brilliant aesthetic nod to a truly legendary Australian show (albeit one that harboured a convicted paedophile. Eeek). In regards to your query, I wouldn't be caught dead saying anything so gauche. If I were pushed, however, to find a fault – and I'm reaching here – it would be that your gloves might be a tad obvious? Something you'd see, perhaps, in an indie film that's done a bit *too well* at the box office! The rest of your outfit was impeccable, though, and this minor gaffe shouldn't detract from what was an otherwise arresting ensemble.

P.S. As for the fedora, I'd love to divulge, but my dealer has sworn me to secrecy. (As you can imagine, the more clients she has, the less successful she'll be.)

Peace out,

Grace

Hi Grace,

Thanks for taking the time to get back to me. I would have replied sooner, but I'm currently writing a thesis on the religious leanings of underground 80s punk band *Crimson Moon*. You may not have heard of them – they were famous for only one week, and even then, only among a handful of people (one of whom includes yours truly). A small heads-up: I may have accidentally found your fedora!! And when I say your fedora, I mean its duplicate, at Target. People were buying it in their droves! Uh oh!

Love Stephanie

Hi Stephanie,

Cheers for the heads-up, but I burnt that fedora several weeks ago (almost immediately after leaving the party) having augured its eventual dribble into the

mainstream. It would have been classic if you'd purchased it, though. ROFL.

P.S. I am literally ROFLING at the moment in an attempt to break in a pair of dungarees I bought from a homeless man last week. (It has nothing to recommend it other than the brutally distressed look I'm currently applying.)

Yours from the floor,

Grace

Hi Grace,

I went back and bought the fedora soon after sending you this email. It was a figurative finger to consumerism, and since the herd will soon have discarded it in their migration to the next mass trend, I plan on wearing it ironically at the very instant it becomes redundant – perhaps with a pair of bifocals that only allow me to see half the world clearly. (A metaphor for the intellectual blindness that envelops the general public.)

Stephanie

Dear Stephanie,

It was with great sadness that I read your latest correspondence. I fear you may have fallen prey to an avaricious sales assistant offloading last year's stock. How awful to be thwarted in your attempt to stick it to the man. Love to write more, but I'm currently in Paris. (The plane ticket was so dear I had to make my oeufs brouillés from caged eggs. Gasp.)

Grace

Hi Grace,

I pray to anything or anyone that may or may not listen (I'm currently an agnostic pantheist) that you aren't in Paris for the purpose of shopping. In 1987, when I first evinced my fashion nous by burning a pair of particularly offensive pink and red striped pants my mother had gifted me, I vowed never to support a country that so brazenly railroads the avant-garde, whose lack of money in no way reflects his or her stylistic vision.

Yours from the armpits of an Armadale op shop,

Stephanie

Hi Stephanie,

Your presumption that I am doing Paris as the everyman shows an appalling lack of insight into my self-effacing aesthetic. Far from relying on the vulgar greenback, I'm currently eschewing worldly pleasures in a hostel that has attempted to recreate the squalor of early 1900s Montmartre. The unassuming couple who run it rely solely on good faith donations and the profits from their medicinal marijuana business. My quarters are frequented by a Tibetan monk, an ex-KKK member, a failed fashion designer and a four-fingered prostitute. Need I say more? All of whom have inspired me to create this outfit (photo attached) which, I think you'll appreciate, could not have found its inspiration in Armadale. (And yes, that gentleman begging in the background is a genuine leper.)

Love Grace

Hi Grace,

Please refer to me now as Marcel – I recently changed it in honour of the great Marcel Duchamp, whose ground-breaking piece, *Fountain*, changed forever the face of modern art. By adopting a unisex name,

I simultaneously challenge the shackles of gender dichotomisation. I think you'll find that the sexism inherent in unambiguously "female" names (see Grace) may foster sexual harassment, rape and even literal/figurative death.

Marcel

Hi Marcel,

(And I can hardly bring myself to say that name without revisiting my dinner.) That particular name, at least according to *The New Yorker*, featured in the top 100 baby names of 2014. I'm sure you can have it rescinded. I just lit some Fair-Trade incense in the hope that you can.

Grace

Hi Grace,

Oh no!! I think my message may have been too revolutionary for you!!! Let me elucidate: I was already aware that it was in the top 100 names – (I've been subscribed to the New Yorker since 1993, when, as a young girl, I realised that Enid Blyton's overtly misogynistic works were retarding my intellectual and spiritual growth). I *intentionally* chose a popular contemporary name, thus undermining the fetish for the "novel" which so dominates mass culture.

Have you come across the writings of Slavoj Žižek? In one of his more startling claims, he suggests that transgression from the norm is actually solicited in late capitalism, and is thus essentially *conformist* in nature. I strongly recommend it, especially if you've been consisting solely on a diet of that notorious fraud Hegel, whose work, frankly, leaves me cold.

Enlighteningly yours,

Marcel

Hi Marcel,

Impotent missions aside, I believe it was the revered writer Elmore Leonard who advised that one should use no more than three exclamation marks per 100,000 words of prose. Unless you plan on writing your own version of *War and Peace* (and I highly doubt this given the quality of your emails), you have far exceeded your quota. It is also clear to any discerning woman that the exclamation mark is a phallic symbol that represses woman at the very moment of its employment. I hope you don't mind me speaking bluntly, but I'm a little shocked at your ignorance.

In the hope of your grammatical emancipation,

Grace

Hi Grace,

This supposedly phallic symbol, I think you'll find, is complete with a period at the bottom. If the stamp of the female was ever more clearly inscribed, I'd eat my ironic fedora!! Among simpler individuals, this might be construed as male dominance, but the period clearly overrides this, functioning as the base from which all (re)productive male exploits find their source. It's a fact generally overlooked by those who haven't proceeded beyond an undergraduate degree.

A free-form Haiku I wrote on this exact topic has recently been published in online zine, *Plato's Lunchbox*, and they have kindly agreed to donate 20% of the profits to a charity of my choosing – in this case, the majority went to *CACE* (Consumers Against Caged Eggs). Considering that situational ethics are the refuge of the moral pauper, I found your week-on/week-off support of chickens' wellbeing inexcusable. The remaining 5% I spread out across a number of aid organisations, as to privilege one charity over the other would no doubt plummet us into that very same caste system which currently holds the Indian people to ransom. (The Ganges, on a side note, is a personal Mecca, and I look forward to swimming with these noble people who, despite their tragic attire, exhibit a truly artistic spirit.

Marcel

Marcel,

To implicitly support the work of late 16th century missionary Vasco de Ataíde, who ingratiated himself with the locals of that hallowed land as a purely self-gratifying venture, you enact a neo-colonialism that is as appalling as it is tasteless. It is also a dreadfully *common* offense. If you no longer wish to be shackled by the burden of conventionalism; one which is obviously taxing your mental health, come to a small seminar I'm delivering this afternoon entitled *Society's Salamander: Shedding Orthodoxy in the Age of (Un)reason*. I think the error of your ways will soon become evident.

Grace

Grace,

I mean no offence when I say that I think your seminar will be little more than the ravings of a madman and that I would rather drink cat piss than come.

Best,

Marcel

Hi Marcel,

No offence taken. As the great Alexander Pope once said, "to err is human, to forgive, divine." With this in mind I overlooked your obviously self-directed anger; anger that was, no doubt, the result of gross inebriation and the humiliation of yet another rejected manuscript.

P.S. I am currently in the process of writing a book called *Dante's Inferno Revisited*. In it, I detail a *tenth* circle of Hell which involves all its citizens having to listen to your voice

(which I imagine resembles the mating call of a libidinous seagull) ad infinitum. After a few hours, the residents will be gagging for some good old-fashioned hellfire.

Grace.

Hi Grace (exercised below),

Touring inside the cesspool of your mind was a Kafkaesque nightmare from which I may never recover. Consequently, I face Robert Frost's proverbial fork in the road: one path tells me to raise funds for your immediate lobotomisation. The other involves me telling you that you're a Grade A shithead and I hope you lose whichever hand is responsible for penning the relentless excrement you label "literature." Let me confess that I did not take the road less travelled.

Much Love,

Marcel.

Marcel,

Fuck you.

Love Grace.

Hi Marcel,

I haven't heard from you in a while. I imagine you were unable to fashion a response to my email – an email which in two simple words communicated more than you could in a lifetime of your so-called “free form” haikus. Should you wish to discuss this crushing defeat further, I'm happy to chat. I have always lived by the motto *let bygones be bygones*, even when those “bygones” would have tested the collective willpower of the Vatican.

Grace.

Marcel?

Dear Mrs Jones,

Please accept my sincerest condolences on the passing of your daughter, Marcel (nee Stephanie). I am sure that as she was being trampled to death under the feet of her contemporaries, she felt the warm embrace of knowing that her persistent rallying would, sooner or later, lead to the eradication of Hegel from tertiary syllabi. Please kindly let me know when and where the funeral ceremony is so that I can pay my last respects. Would I also be permitted to say a few words? No one was more passionate about my literary pursuits than your daughter. I was thinking of reading a small and moving excerpt from my recently-published novel: "The ironic fedora: cosmic justice in the age of skepticism." I think she'd have got a real kick out of it.

Yours Sincerely,

Grace.

CARNIVAL LAUGHTER AND ITS CONDUITS

In *Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse*, Priscilla Marie Meddaugh notes that satire and parody are carnival's "primary agents" and that they "exploit paired images and role reversals, both uniting and juxtaposing 'the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid'" (2010, 379). Since both satire and parody are operating in the humorous acts outlined in the body of this thesis (whether that be in a textual or practical form), a brief exploration of their carnivalesque nature and function is necessary here.

SATIRE

One of the literary forms that Bakhtin discusses in connection to carnival is Menippean satire, a genre that he claims "became one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world . . . [remaining] so to the present day" (1994b, 113). Menippean satire, according to Bakhtin, contains the kind of dialogic properties (and carnivalesque energy) one witnesses in the emerging novel, and the two are closely linked. As M. Keith Booker notes: "Bakhtin's work on Menippean satire is inseparable from his work on the novel because the types of novels privileged by Bakhtin are still centrally informed by Menippean energies" (1995, 2). The connection between carnival and Menippean satire is apparent when we realise that the "upside down" or "inside out" world that is central to the carnival is also a dominant feature of Menippean satire. Bakhtin identifies as one of the key characteristics of this form of satire, for example, "experimental fantasticality," whereby the satirist allows us to view our "normal" world from an unusual vantage point, such as a great height (1994b, 116). This altered perspective prompts a reassessment of certain philosophical and ideological assumptions, Bakhtin noting that "use of the fantastic and adventure is internally motivated, justified by and devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end: the creation of *extraordinary situations* for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth" (1994b, 114).

Due to its critical drive, carnival always contains a satirical edge. It is important to recognise, however, that Menippean satire is of a distinct type and, like the carnival, must be "opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order" (1994b, 160). Accordingly, it is distinguished from certain forms of satire which do not display the *ambivalence* of the carnival. As Booker notes:

The first and most fundamental characteristic of the carnival (and therefore of Menippean satire) is its ambivalence – different points of view, different worlds, may be mutually and simultaneously present without any privileging of one over the other, so that the different worlds can comment on each other in a dialogic way" (1995, 2).

Furthermore, as Paul Allen Miller suggests, while certain satirical works contain representations of the grotesque body (thereby potentially embodying the ambivalence of carnival), such representations do not automatically make the work “carnavalesque” as their debasement lacks any curative counterpart. He cautions: “Any form of grotesque degradation that does not include a strong restorative element within it represents not the fulfillment of carnival but its loss” (1998, 258).

To illuminate this distinction further, it is useful to compare two broad categories of satire: Juvenalian and Horatian. The former is defined by Gary Dyer as “akin to a tragic mode . . . meant to induce fear . . . uncompromisingly harsh and moralistic,” while the latter is “more attuned to the comic, aims at laughter or amusement, its poetic speaker being presented as mild, amicable, almost conciliatory” (2006, 39). Gilbert Highet devotes a portion of *Anatomy of Satire* to comparing the various satiric tendencies of several prominent writers. Discussing Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, for example, he notes that the author utilises a predominantly Juvenalian approach:

The most powerful and durable parts of these books are the meditations and manifestoes in which, with hideous violence and shocking foulness of language, he denounces the whole world of his time and most of its component parts. His passion for obscenity is like that of Aristophanes and Rabelais. . . . *The difference is that in spite of its absurdities and hypocrisies they love mankind. Miller, like Swift, believes that humanity is a filthy crime* (1962, 50).

It should be noted that Miller’s departure from Rabelais is due not to the fact that his satirical works are *serious* in tone – after all, Bakhtin states that “true ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness” (1984, 122-123). The crucial difference is that this type of laughter “purifies and completes [seriousness]. . . . From the intolerant and the petrified . . . from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation” (Bakhtin 1984, 123).

Juvenalian satire, on the other hand is what Bakhtin would term “monolithically” serious. It undermines carnivalesque subversion by reinstating a strict authoritarian presence, a moral arbiter who situates himself above the laughter he directs at others. As P. A. Miller notes, “Juvenal’s satirical world presents a form of ideological closure which consistently borders on the paranoid and the agoraphobic” (2001, 157). Horatian satire, conversely, is “often presented as a form of self-satire” (Holbert et al. 2011, 192), and thus enacts a levelling effect. It points to our “communal” foibles, and channels the laughter of the carnival, wherein “there is no difference between being the object and the subject of ridicule. You are laughing at yourself and the world” (Mortensen 1994, 640).

Woman Sees Donald Trump In Her Vegan Butter



(Fig. 10) *I can't believe it IS butter.*

PARODY

In *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*, John Clark notes of parody that it “is probably satire's strongest calling card” (1991, 99). Bakhtin also claims that an essential feature of Menippean satire is the interrelated device of parody, or what he refers to as a “*decrowning double*” (1994b, 127). Bakhtin declares it “one of the most ancient” forms in history as well as highlighting its ubiquity:

There never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse – artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday – that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie* (1994a, 53).

While some suggest that parody is a literary genre specifically (Kreuz and Roberts 1993), certain humorous *acts* such as pranking can potentially be parodies or at least serve a parodic function, and thus I refer to the broader understanding of parody as “*a humorous imitation of a specific artistic work, person, idea, or historical period*” (Rishel 2002, 201).

Certainly, this reflects the more comprehensive view of parody that Bakhtin subscribes to, relating it not only to textual practices (such as Rabelais’ writing), but to carnival life itself. “Parodia sacra,” as Meddaugh notes, is key to carnival laughter, and involves not only parodying “revered texts,” but “official discourse” (2010, 379). We see such “parodia sacra” operating in a variety of carnival rituals: during the Feast of Fools or the Boy Bishop ceremony, for example, wherein a “poor man – often chosen by virtue of his ugliness” or a young boy would supplant an ordained Bishop and be “granted the full rank and privilege of the real cleric” (Lindahl 1996, 65).

According to Bakhtin, parody operates in “a twofold direction . . . directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another’s discourse*, toward *someone else’s*

speech" (1994b, 185). Parody thus reveals itself as essentially dialogic in nature, allowing for at least two conflicting voices to operate simultaneously. Conversely, it is opposed to the unifying, authorial tendencies of monologism. As Robert Hariman notes in *Political Parody and Public Culture*:

Before being parodied, any discourse could potentially become all-encompassing (such is the dream of totalitarianism). Once set beside itself, not only that discourse but the entire system is destabilized. . . . For what was capable of becoming an all-encompassing worldview has been cut down to size, corrected against the 'backdrop of a contradicting reality' (2008, 254).

Here again we see the essentially ambivalent and dialogic nature of parodic laughter. While it gives voice to dissent, often involving "*profanation*: carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and bringings down to earth" (Bakhtin 1994b, 124), it nevertheless maintains the regenerative properties of dialogism and carnival, as seen in the act of replication itself, whereby there are always "two possible responses to any discourse: that which it intends and the laughter of those who see it through the lens of its parodic double" (Hariman 2008, 254).

PRANKING AND CARNIVAL

Several acts of humorous subversion outlined in the body of this thesis take the form of pranks or tricks, and while a more detailed analysis of their specific link to carnival will be undertaken at a later stage, I would like to devote this portion of the chapter to examining the broad connection between pranking and carnival. The benefit of such a discussion is that it also foregrounds the trickster figure who will be discussed in detail throughout the following chapter (a character for whom pranking is a mode of existence).

In many ways, the terms "prankster" and "trickster" are overlapping. In common parlance, one might just as easily speak of a trickster performing pranks, for example, as of a prankster performing tricks. On a technical level, however, the terms are more nuanced. In Alison Williams' study of trickster and prankster figures in French and German Literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, she notes that the difference lies in their respective *motivations*. While pranksters derive pleasure solely from the performative or theatrical aspects of their craft, tricksters' "deliberate aim is to achieve material gain or psychological victory using wit and deception. . . . Any pleasure in the actual execution of the trick is of secondary importance" (2000, 1).

This introductory distinction, however, is prefaced by A. William's admission that "there is little qualitative difference in the nature of their actions," and she goes on to examine several characters (Panurge and Eulenspiegel, for example) who trouble this trickster/prankster divide (2000, 1).

Ultimately, A. Williams concludes, “irrespective of their intra-textual role,” both tricksters and pranksters function to “provoke laughter” and to provide “us” (the reader or participant) with a “temporary experience of the carnivalesque” (2000, 211).

At first glance, pranks may appear to be an entirely frivolous undertaking or (more worryingly) derisive laughter directed at the duped party. Certainly, pranks are rarely thought of as an effective tool for questioning social or political conventions. In *On Pranks*, however, Kembrew McLeod notes that while many pranks can indeed serve purely to “make someone else look foolish,” a “good” prank does more, and “ought to serve a higher purpose by engaging with the world through humor and critique” (2011, 97). Similarly, Andrea Juno and V. Vale note that while pranking “connotes *fun, laughter, jest, satire, lampooning, making a fool of someone* – all light-hearted activities” (1987, 4), a more profound function is often at work:

Thus do pranks camouflage the sting of deeper, more critical denotations, such as their direct challenge to all verbal and behavioral *routines*, and their undermining of the sovereign authority of words, language, visual images, and social conventions in general. Regardless of specific manifestation, a prank is always an evasion of *reality*. Pranks are the *deadly enemy* of reality. And “reality” – its description and limitation – has always been the supreme control trick used by a society to subdue the lust for freedom latent in its citizens (1987, 4).

Here we see the connection between pranking and carnival. “Reality” is the condition of the people’s extra-carnival life, a life often marked by oppression and subscription to arbitrary social and political conventions. Carnival, however, in its joyful toppling of such structures and conventions, unmasks the ultimately illusory nature of this everyday “reality,” igniting the aforementioned “lust for freedom.” As Audrey Vanderford suggests in *Political Pranks: The Performance of Radical Humor*: “Pranks act to reinvigorate criticism, to challenge complacency, and to provoke thought. Pranks are counter-hegemonic acts that interrupt the top-down flow of ideology, revealing the machinations of the powerful and of the State” (2000, 18).

Furthermore, pranks of the kind we are discussing here promote the type of open-ended dialogue that Bakhtin champions, or what Christine Harold in her article *Pranking Rhetoric* terms, “an augmentation of dominant modes of communication” (2004, 196). Harold provides two different definitions of the term “prank.” The first, from Middle English, describes the act of adding “a stylistic flourish as to one’s dress,” while the other denotes a “fold” or a “pleat.” Of these definitions, she observes:

In neither alternative is a prank an act of dialectical opposition. In the first alternative sense, as in to “deck in a showy manner,” a prank is a *stylistic exaggeration*. . . . In the second alternative sense, a prank is a wrinkle, or a fold. Like a fold, a prank can render a qualitative change by turning and doubling a material or text (2004, 196).

Rather than the dialectical opposition which is anathema to the carnival spirit, pranks, through the means mentioned above, aid in the proliferation of voices and subsequently dismantle the tyranny of any one dominant, authorial voice. Such properties, I hope to illustrate, are at work in the pranks that will be detailed later in this thesis.

CRITICISMS

Prominent literary theorist Terry Eagleton has said of Bakhtin's conception of carnival that "few modern critical concepts have proved more fertile and suggestive, more productively polymorphous" (as quoted in Evans, 1991, 354). However Bakhtin is not without his detractors, not only because of his tendency towards repetition (Morson and Emerson, 1990, 5), but because his views on the utopian nature and trajectory of carnival are seen as overly idealistic, Bakhtin supposedly ascribing to carnival properties that fail to be borne out in reality:

In the carnivalesque game of inverting official values [Bakhtin] sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway (Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis 1988, 118).

Various critics have found such views problematic. In *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, Morson and Emerson state that several of the included writers or "challengers" in their edited book "question overly optimistic conclusions that [Bakhtin's] own arguments cannot sustain" (1989, 4). In Morson and Emerson's later work (the seminal *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*) this critique resurfaces, Gardiner summarising their position as follows:

Morson and Emerson take Bakhtin to task for a surplus of utopianism in what they term his "third period" works, most notably in what is often regarded as his masterwork, *Rabelais and His World*. Briefly, Morson and Emerson argue that in this phase of his career, Bakhtin placed a misguided emphasis on an unfettered Utopian vision of orgiastic excess and transgressive license" (1992a, 21-22).

Gardiner asserts, however, that such criticism betrays a misunderstanding of the term "utopia" and its wide semantic range. Rather than subscribing to the traditional understanding of utopia as simply "fantasies of ideal cities, forms of social organization or mythical lands which are the product of an individual's creative imagination," Gardiner argues that contemporary approaches to the concept of utopia understand it as "manifestations of pervasive social and ideological conflicts with respect to the desired trajectory of social change" (1992a, 22).

Paul Ricoeur's work on the concept of utopia is also illuminating here. In *Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination*, he argues that the "utopian mode" can be interpreted as a "theory of imagination" (1976, 24). Consequently, he notes, it essentially exists "nowhere," thus benefitting from an "extra-territoriality" which allows one to cast an "exterior glance . . . on our reality, which suddenly looks strange. . . . The field of the possible . . . now opened beyond that of the actual, a field for alternative ways of living" (1976, 24). This new viewpoint allows us to re-examine our assumptions about the nature of everyday life. Ricoeur states: "Utopia is the way in which we radically rethink what is family, consumption, government, religion, etc. The fantasy of an alternative society and its topographical figuration 'nowhere' works as the most formidable contestation of what is" (1976, 24). These interpretations of utopia, I argue, are much closer to Bakhtin's utopic vision for carnival; that it inspires a re-examination of social and cultural norms and the hierarchical structuring of everyday life rather than the actualisation of "ideal cities." Certainly, revolution *may* take place, but that is not the chief end of carnival. Rather, "carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, *a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (Bakhtin 1994b, 123).

Other theorists, posing a related (but distinct) criticism, have claimed that carnival not only lacks the ability to enact social change, but *reinforces* the hierarchical structure it seeks to undermine. As Gavin Grindon notes, "many have argued . . . that carnival does not have such revolutionary potential, but is in fact a sort of social 'safety valve' that allows the official world to operate unhindered the rest of the time, and is in this sense complicit with that which it superficially opposes" (2004, 151). Commentators such as Terry Eagleton have stressed the "licensed" nature of carnival, calling it a "contained popular blow-off" (1981, 148), while prominent New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt, in his influential essay *Invisible Bullets*, argues that the dominant order often *generates* such subversion in order to ultimately *contain* or use it towards its own ends (1994).

While noting the potential strength of such objections, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White seek to challenge either polarised view of carnival, providing instead the following insight:

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression. The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle* (1986, 14).

As we have witnessed in our discussion of the dialogic nature of language (itself tied to carnival), dialogism involves the co-existence of a variety of competing and contrasting "voices." Were the

carnival to be defined in terms of being either purely “radical” or purely “conservative,” it would invoke the “false essentializing” characteristic of monologic language, prompting a dialectical form of resolution whereby one concrete definition of carnival would prevail. Furthermore, Stallybrass and White are right to return our attention to carnival’s *symbolic* potential. When power is usurped and reoriented, regardless of the brevity of the period in which such transgressions occur, transformation is possible. Certainly, Bakhtin himself perceives no conflict in emphasising both the subversive *and* temporary nature of carnival transgression, stating: “This truth was ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which prepared the new Renaissance consciousness” (1984, 91).

This notion that the carnival has liberating and transgressive properties but is nonetheless caught up in the matrices of power within which it operates is of special significance to this thesis. Many instances of humorous subversion outlined in the body of this thesis seem to involve me only *temporarily* challenging dominant ideologies or restrictive social mores (as my subsequent recapitulation to these norms illustrates). While this may superficially seem to give credence to the aforementioned criticisms (that carnival is either severely limited in its reach or actually serves to reinforce order), I recall Grindon’s useful observation that, for Bakhtin, “the realisation of an alternative, carnivalesque world, is not synonymous with revolution” (2004, 150). Rather, it allows us, as Bakhtin notes, to be emancipated “from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (1984, 34).

Home Truths



(Fig. 11)

Buying a house at auction is fraught with danger. It awakens an ugly competitive streak that's only exacerbated by the complimentary champagne bottle dangled in front of winning bidders. Auction fever also paralyses the part of your brain responsible for budgeting, which is why my entire family tried to convince me to give someone else that paddle thing that you thought only existed in the movies. (It's real, and I wasn't having a bar of it.) Sure, I might suddenly bid \$100,000 more than the bank was willing to lend me, but if any fool was going to be swiftly parted with his money, it was me.

The day started as any auction should; with a coffee van, free hot dogs, and one decidedly oily auctioneer who kicked things off by identifying the merits of the house – its proximity to the river and airport, its yesteryear charm and the recent extensions to the back of the house. He also delivered a surprisingly elegant monologue on the area's potential for gentrification – an odd tack considering it made everyone think about how rubbish Redcliffe currently is.

The auction itself was like a cross between *Escape to the Country* and *The Hunger Games*. By the end, my last remaining rival and I were going up by thousands, which prompted the auctioneer to say, "C'mon, we're not dealing in Tic Tacs here." I'm not sure where he buys his confectionery, but I didn't feel the slightest pressure to take it up a notch, and neither did my opponent. We were feeling badass enough as it was dropping huge wads of hypothetical cash on a suburban street in the middle of the day.

In a gripping denouement which involved protracted periods of silence (both of us envisioning years of mortgage-related impoverishment), I smoked the last guy out, mostly because he had

sustained RSI in his paddle hand. Everybody wept. My sister, my mum, the house owner and possibly even the oily auctioneer with the taste for expensive candy. The owner, thank goodness, was not crying because she'd offloaded her lemon of a house, but because the breakdown of her marriage had forced her to sell and move to Sydney. It was terribly sad, and I tried to look concerned, but I was distracted by a lovely leather lounge-suite of hers which looked too bulky to travel interstate.

Getting the house also meant getting to stop *looking* for houses, and that was a definite plus. It wouldn't be long now before me and my mentally-challenged cat Phyllis (who is not only a companion to me, but an ever-present reminder of my waning fertility) could move in to our new fleshpot. I'd been in the house-hunting game for six months by then and was sick of going to open days and being disappointed by the disparity between the photos and reality. A bit like Facebook profile photos, it was all about deceptively flattering filters and angles. Bathed in the harsh light of day, you could suddenly make out its rampant acne and multiple chins. This house, however, was "it." And by "it," I mean it had a veranda, which made me think of tea parties and rocking chairs and gun-toting Texas grandpas and it was all very lovely and quaint. If one ventured into the house itself, the sense of nostalgia was only intensified. The smug real estate agent with a degree in hyperbole was correct – mine was truly a "character house."

"Character," I soon learned, is lovely in theory, but not so lovely once one's roof has almost caved in. In fact, nearly everything that I initially considered an adorable quirk soon lost its charm. "Character" means chips and cracks and disrepair. It means you can fry an egg on your forehead in summer. It means gaps in your wooden floorboards so wide that you can air your nether regions on a windy day.



(Fig. 12) *It tickles!*

Fibro houses, it also turns out, always contain some form of asbestos from back in the days when they were into slow and painful deaths. Only one section of the house definitely has it, and it's painted

over, but it's enough to give me the creeps. Still, in Redcliffe, I'm far more likely to die of a gang-related shooting than asbestosis, so that's a comfort.

The funny thing is that the suburb of Redcliffe actually isn't too bad. It's just the *people* that let it down. I stand by my claim that if a tourist were to drive his or her car through the streets, they might mistake it for one of the nicer areas of Perth. It's green and leafy, with wide roads and wider blocks, and the houses, while somewhat dilapidated, are charming. To stop and chat to one of its inhabitants, though, or visit the local shopping centre is to have that illusion shattered. A trip to Redcliffe IGA, as my boyfriend describes it, is an anthropological exercise. From the moment one enters, one is assaulted by a bewildering array of sounds, sights and smells. Without fail, a baby is screaming. Somebody, somewhere, has lost a shoe, and the pungent tang of body odour, weed, or both, is enough to make the eyes water. Aisle three is always in disarray, the floor has never known a mop and bucket, and good luck finding a shopping trolley with four wheels.

No one, and I really do mean NO ONE, loves a bargain more than me, but the discount stand has food on it that has *actually expired*. It'll be there weeks later, halved in price again, halving, infinitely, until it sprouts mould or decomposes. By each of the checkouts is a collage of various shoppers caught thieving on camera – snapped in the act of shoving chocolate bars down their pants or stuffing frozen pies into their backpack. (No one has, as of yet, purloined anything from the discount stand, because even criminals have standards.)

Don't get me wrong – sometimes I look like *the exact* kind of person who should have their personals frisked – but the other day I had my bag inspected on the way out to dinner. I'm talking makeup, deodorant, the lot – I looked and smelled like the kind of person who has never frequented an IGA in their life. *I have nothing to hide*, I thought, opening my bag for one decidedly carbuncular checkout boy. And then I remembered that I do. *I really do*. Not because I've nicked anything, but because my bag contains the kind of paraphernalia no handbag in history has housed. Beneath a year's worth of crumpled receipts and loose change, the foraging hand might chance upon a pair of underwear, or a rusty screwdriver. Rummage further, and who knows what you'll discover. I once found a Gladwrapped chicken drumstick in one of the bag's side compartments. It must have been there a while, too, because it was greying, and had the faint aroma of a day-old corpse by the time I retrieved it. That one was a real wake-up call, and proof, perhaps, that Redcliffe really is the suburb for me.

In all honesty, I don't know how I'd go living somewhere swanky. We were poor growing up. So poor, in fact, that when we lived in Canada my sister was given a two-dollar coin by a girl in her primary school class. Her mother had told her to give it to a charity of her choosing. Horrified as she initially may have been, my sister kept it, happy to have collected a month's worth of pocket money in one fell swoop. I think the mentality stuck. I've always felt a little out of place in Perth's ritzier suburbs, with

their sprawling mansions and Scandinavian interiors, their Feng shui-angled Chippendales and eighteenth-century chaise longues. A trip to the local shopping centre, Claremont Quarter, with its marble floors and gleaming surfaces, is even more unsettling. Who are these terrifying women with their perfect bodies and perfect hair? And who the hell goes grocery shopping in stilettos?

The payoff, I imagine, with a trace of Schadenfreude, must be a lifetime of insecurity. A veritable eternity of trying to keep up. *How dire the consequences of a sagging midriff*, I think, *or a year-old pair of pants*. "Is that from Gucci's 2016 collection?" a friend from your mothers' group might say. You'd look down, horrified – the bag *did* look a little last season. When you got home, you'd burn half the clothes in your wardrobe and all of your shoes. You'd consider some light self-flagellation, but eventually think better of it. Summer was coming. Your country club membership would be revoked. Coffee dates would dry up. You wouldn't even receive an invite to Anne Ballantyne's lacklustre annual Christmas party.

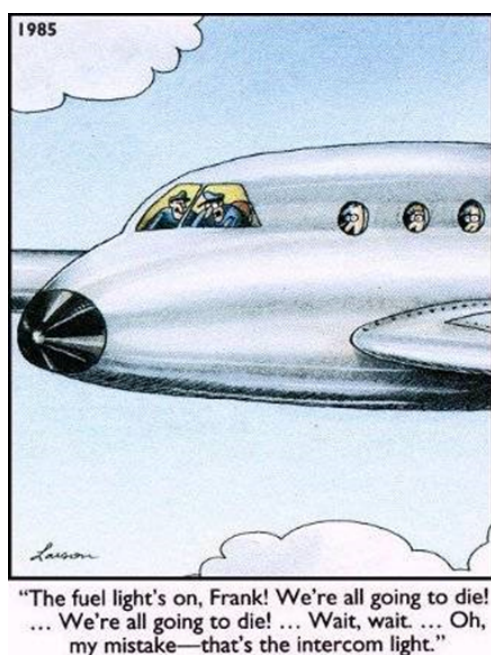
What tales of horror you could tell, I think, as another perfectly manicured woman sails past, her Hermès scarf trailing behind her. *The poor bastards*, I mutter to myself, as two well-heeled business men share a laugh. Tonight, no doubt, they will be weeping into a wad of fifties, their money ill-equipped to repair a loveless marriage or stave off male pattern baldness. My relative liberty strikes me, and with it a giddy sense of emancipation. "Sometimes I don't wash my hair for a week," I feel like saying to a group of women hobnobbing in the foyer of Louis Vuitton. "I have a nighty that doubles as a dress," I imagine screaming from within the confines of some outlandishly priced parfumerie. When I have everyone's attention, I might drop the ultimate truth bomb: "I once caught *public transport*."

But I don't. Because that would be uncouth. Because that would be unbecoming for a responsible, house-owning, mortgage-paying 33-year-old. And because as bad as living in Redcliffe might seem, it's nothing compared to the misery of these poor, wretched millionaires.

THE TRICKSTER/TRICKSTAR

The central objective of this thesis is to identify the way in which my life has evidenced aspects of the carnivalesque. Over the course of my research I became aware that one of these links can be found in the similarities I share with a quintessentially carnivalesque character – namely the trickster. This chapter introduces the reader to the complex and multifaceted trickster figure, examines his links with the carnival, as well as briefly outlining my connection to the trickster. (A fuller examination of our similarities will take place more organically throughout the body of my writing as I reflect on the autoethnographical data provided.) Furthermore, it introduces the “trickstar,” a term which proves useful for feminist discourse and for challenging the “predominantly male-centred comparative theory of the trickster in myth and literature” (Mills 2001, 238).

TRICKSTER 101



(Fig. 13)

While the term “trickster” has come to be applied to “any fictional character that is seen to be clever, deceitful, and selfish” (M. Carroll 1981, 305), older traditional definitions denote the ubiquitous mythological figure that appears, in a variety of guises, within the folklore of almost every culture throughout history. There is some contention over the first appearance of the term in the English language. Although the majority of sources place it in Daniel G. Brinton’s *Myths of the New World*,

published in 1868, Lewis Hyde claims that the term was first introduced by Franz Boas in his introduction to the book *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians* (Krupat 2009, 2-3). Disputes over the term's coinage foreshadow an even more contested matter, namely the definition of the trickster figure himself.

As William J. Hynes and William G. Doty note: "For centuries, perhaps millennia, and in the widest variety of cultural and religious belief systems, humans have told and retold tales of tricksters, figures who are usually comical, yet serve to highlight important social values" (1997, 1-2). Examples abound, from Olympian god Hermes, to the Raven, Coyote or Hare of tribal North America, to African-American folklore figure, Br'er Rabbit. The proliferations are numerous and varied, theorists locating the trickster (or characters that display trickster-like qualities) in unlikely places, contemporary and ancient, and across a variety of mediums. As Michael Wessels notes, the term "occurs in a range of literary, scholarly and popular contexts. . . . It has been applied not only to characters from myth and folklore but to a range of figures from sources as far apart as the gospels and contemporary film" (2008, 12).

It is hardly surprising, then, that attempts to provide a clear definition of the trickster have proved difficult, particularly due to the differences in philosophical and methodological approach. As Bei Cai notes, "although the interest in studying trickster figures has generated a dossier of research, scholars find themselves in the traditional epistemological debate about universals and particulars" (2008, 277). In his study on archetypes, for example, Carl Jung focusses less on the particular manifestations of tricksters than on the figure's symbolic value, viewing the trickster "in his clearest manifestations" as "a faithful copy of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness" (1972, 200). Similarly, anthropologist Paul Radin in his seminal text *The Trickster* sees in the figure of the trickster an archetypal aspect of the human psyche, posing the question: "Is this a *speculum mentis* wherein is depicted man's struggle with himself and with a world into which he [has] been thrust without his volition and consent?" (1972, xxiv).

The ethnographer, however, might prefer to examine specific *occurrences* of trickster myths within distinct societies and time periods. In his essay on the Kaguru trickster of the East African people, for example, Thomas Beidelman utilises the term reluctantly, noting that "one is drawn into using the very terms and references which one is subjecting to question" and stating that his aim is "to advocate abandoning the term as applied on a global basis" (1980, 28). Sociology professor Michael Carroll positions himself somewhere in the middle, disagreeing with Beidelman's rejection of "any attempt to develop a cross-culturally valid definition," and suggesting instead that "investigators should reduce

the generality of the trickster label by recognizing that this label subsumes several distinct character types (e.g., the clever hero, the selfish-buffoon-who-is-a-culture-hero, etc)” (1984, 107). This last point is of particular relevance to my thesis as I attempt to identify which particular “type” or “brand” of trickster I most embody.

My purpose in outlining these differences serves not only to provide a background of the literature on the trickster figure, but also to highlight an important aspect of the figure himself – namely his deeply paradoxical nature. As Hynes and Doty note, “the diversity and complexity of the appearances of the trickster figure raise doubt that it can be encompassed as a single phenomenon” (1997, 2). Even the descriptors used to classify the trickster highlight this point, amongst them “liminal” (V. Turner 1968), “defy[ing] homogenization” (Smith 1997, xii), “the very embodiment of elusiveness” (Pelton 1980, 1) and “combin[ing] in one personage no less than two and sometimes three or more seemingly different and contrary roles” (Ricketts 1966, 327).

Nevertheless, some kind of classification of the trickster must be made, specifically in the case of this thesis, where drawing comparisons between myself and the trickster forms an integral part of the research project. Accordingly, I have relied on what I think are the broadest definitions I could find, attempts to adumbrate, if not provide a rigid classification of, the elusive trickster figure. In doing so, I gain a useful heuristic tool while avoiding the scholarly pitfall outlined by Jeanne Rosier Smith in her assertion that “we cannot – nor would we want to – capture this slippery figure categorically, a fact that has long frustrated and mystified western scholars” (1997, 8).

TRICKSTER AS “CULTURE HERO”

As mentioned by M. Carroll, definitions of the trickster benefit greatly from breaking the broader term into various subcategories. Of the various trickster types, M. Carroll suggests that two main categories exist, namely trickster as “culture-hero,” and trickster as “selfish buffoon”:

The one observation that has forced itself upon every anthropologist who has studied the trickster myths in detail . . . is that the trickster seems to be the merger of two independent personalities, one which is indeed a “selfish buffoon” of the Bugs Bunny variety, and the other which is a culture-hero (1981, 305).

After reading both scholarly work on tricksters and trickster tales themselves, I realised that I identified more with the “trickster/culture hero,” than the “trickster/selfish buffoon.” Before the reader infers from this that I am equating myself with a “hero” (any pretensions of this kind will be swiftly debunked

in the following chapters), I would like to stress that my identification with the trickster/culture hero is mostly based on a perceived departure from the more malevolent and destructive aspects of the trickster/selfish buffoon. The trickster/culture hero, conversely, tends towards regenerative and creative acts, the kind that further align him with carnival, that epicentre of “revival and renewal” (Bakhtin 1984, 7). Arguably the most famous example of the “trickster/culture hero” can be found in the figure of Nanabozho who recurs under a variety of different names (among them, Manbhozo, Wenebojo, Manabozo, Nanabush, Michabo, Mishaabooz and the Great Hare).

Nanabozho is a recurring figure in the folklore of the Anishinabe (variously known as Ojibwe, Algonquin or Chippewa) people, and in many tales, emphasis is placed on Nanabozho’s regenerative properties and his ultimately creative nature. Elizabeth Gargano, for example, dubs Nanabozho the “trickster-creator” (2010, 190), while Joni Adamson Clarke describes Nanabozho as a “healer” (1992, 39). Tellingly, one of the most famous Nanabhozo tales involves Nanabozho forming a new earth after the old one is destroyed, justifying his descriptor as a being who is “intricately involved in creation” (Leeming 2010, 2: 466).⁷ Additional links between Nanabhozo and carnival are evident in the aforementioned tale’s complete reversal of hierarchical order. Nanabhozo plans to retrieve earth from the bottom of the waters in order to create a new world, but the waters are too deep and he resurfaces empty handed. While several other animals “more experienced in diving” attempt to retrieve the earth after Nanabhozo fails, it is eventually the lowly, inexperienced muskrat who completes the mission (Leeming 2010, 1: 40). Nanabhozo, the trickster/culture hero, certainly employs some of the more questionable tactics utilised by the trickster/selfish buffoon in order to achieve his end, but his nature is predominantly of a benevolent (albeit erratic) bent. So much so that Gerald Vizenor describes him as a “compassionate” trickster:

not the trickster in the word constructions of the anthropologist Paul Radin, the one who "possesses no values, moral or social . . . knows neither good nor evil yet is responsible for both," but the imaginative trickster, the one who cares to balance the world between terminal creeds and humor with unusual manners and ecstatic strategies (1981, xii).

As this statement illustrates, the distinction between the two trickster types is characterised less by the heroic aspects of the trickster/culture hero’s nature than it is his subscription to some kind of moral framework. Importantly, he still displays the same unorthodox behaviours and propensity for games, pranks and tricks that is common to all tricksters.

⁷ In indigenous Australian mythology, the crow often features as the trickster/culture hero, and is responsible for similarly creative, regenerative acts. One well-known story details Crow’s role in introducing fire to mankind. See Mudrooroo (1994, 35-36) and Edwards (2004, 32).

Fan Mail



(Fig. 14)

Dear Meatloaf,

Almost a quarter of a century ago, I bought one of the all-time classics of American rock, namely your 1993 masterpiece, *I'd Do Anything for Love (But I Won't Do That)*. Though the sentiments expressed in this song remain unsurpassed in beauty, straddling the precipice between naivety and searing insight into the human condition, the question on our collective lips remains: what is this "thing" that would nullify your pledge to "do *anything* for love"? Perhaps it is cleaning the toilet. I myself have an aversion to domestic duties, particularly when it involves ablutions. Laundry can also be mind-numbingly dull. And don't even get me started on dusting! The latest research shows that if left untended, your home can amass 20 kilos of dust per year. 20 kilos, Meatloaf!

I get it, I do. When my partner Richard requested I wax his backside five days into the relationship, I initially hesitated. Is *this* my *that*? I thought, ripping hairy strips from betwixt his cheeks and praying for the rapture. But invariably, true love finds a way. Last month he offered to repay the favour by waxing *my* derrière, and the relationship has gone from strength to strength ever since! I mean, for crying out loud, Meat (can I call you that?), you said you're more than happy to "run into hell and back" for love. *Hell and back!*

From one avowed lover to the next, I implore you to rid yourself of this petty clause – I can guarantee that you will never experience *true* intimacy with another human being until you do EVERYTHING for love. Even THAT.

Your lifelong devotee,

Tandy.



(Fig. 15)

Dear Nelly,

There is no doubt you know how to write a song. *Hot in Herre* is a certified banga on par with *Billie Jean* and *Rock the Casbah*, and I, for one, cannot resist the urge to boogie whenever it comes on the radio despite recently having had hip surgery and a dancing style referred to as strange, epileptic, and at one particular wedding, *offensive to all of the bridal party and was I even on the guest list?* I have only one problem with this song, however it pertains to the pivotal lyric. Ergo my concern. You state, in a drawl not dissimilar to those recently recovering from paralysis: "It's getting hot in herre, so take off all your clothes."

I hear you – no one hates the heat more than me. But the idea that you have to take off *the entirety*

of your clothing just because it's getting hot (even in herrrrrrrrre) is the kind of logical fallacy they teach in most first-year philosophy units. In reality, there are myriad alternatives, all of them falling short of

public nudity. I get that a heatwave might immediately make you want to take all of your garments off, to "take them off," as you mention, "like you're home alone," but it isn't socially acceptable as I learnt the other day when I did so at work only to experience a mix of horrified glances and one strongly worded email from Sheila in HR. It is quite possible, you'll be glad to hear, to get cool without taking off ALL of your clothes. Sometimes, several items will suffice.

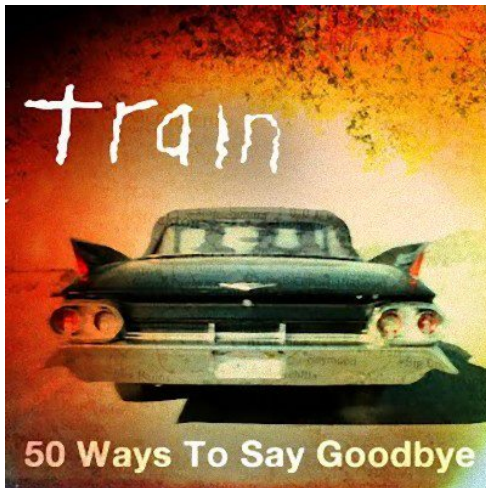


(Fig. 16)

This is a picture of you I found on Google, and while the getup is indubitably hip, you could reasonably have taken off only one or two items of clothing and experienced a significant drop in body temperature. Perhaps, for instance, you could have removed that striped blouse, leaving only the t-shirt underneath. Higher up, you might consider losing the hat, or alternatively, the ladies tights you wear on your head. Can't wait to hear your revised single: "It's getting hot in herre, so take off several items of clothing."

Admirer and fellow chrysophile,

Greg.



(Fig. 17)

Dear band members of Train,

Your song, *50 Ways to Say Goodbye*, reminded me, once again, that good music is about education first, entertainment second. Prior to this album, I was only aware of 36 ways to say goodbye, and many of them weren't even that convincing. You, on the other hand, came up with these corkers: "falling in a cement mixer full of quicksand," "eaten by a lion," "run over by a crappy purple scion," "eaten by a shark," and "caught in a mudslide." The only one I found a little unconvincing was "danced to death." *No one dances to death*. One particular line, though, plagued me long after the initial hearing:

*Someday I'll find a love like yours
She'll think I'm Superman, not Super Minivan
How could you leave on Yom Kippur?*

I know love is blind, but how the hell did your girlfriend mistake you for a minivan, let alone a super minivan?! And the issue is only compounded in the next line. Who, for the love of all that is good and holy, leaves on Yom Kippur?!!! Rosh Hashanah, Hanukkah, Purim, Isru Chag, Passover – any of these would have been fine. But Yom Kippur? *It's the frigging Sabbath of Sabbaths!!!*

This kind of blatant disregard for your feelings is not Kosher, in any sense of the word. From one Jewish brother to the next, I think you need to find a 51st way to say goodbye.

Best,

Ezra "Ezzy" Adler.



(Fig. 18)

Dear Hilary,

When I bought your single the other day, I was looking for a pick me up, something to get me through a difficult working week. I'm a long-time fan, you see – always have been. I picked you as a star way back when you were just a wee tacker, in *Lizzie McGuire*. The whole series was nauseating, but you – *you* – had something that transcended the particulars of that shoddy show. And what a great relief it was when you realised you could sing (phew!), and I knew my husband and I would never have to sit through another screening of *Agent Cody Banks* (a real lemon, I'm sure you'll agree) in order for me to get my Duff fix.

While I was anticipating from *So Yesterday* a few moments of toe-tapping escapism, I had no idea that what you would *actually* deliver was a thought experiment so radical it's a wonder the world's collective brains trust aren't beating down your door. Wedged between all that jazz about you being "so over" people and nicking your ex's clothing lies a monumental revelation. I almost missed it at first (I was in the car at the time), but when I replayed the track, the lyric's impact was such I'm amazed I didn't plough straight into oncoming traffic. You state:

If you're moving on, I'm already gone
If the light is off, then it isn't on
At least not today, not today, not today

And there it is...

If the light is off, then it isn't on.

Could anything be simpler? More tectonically profound? In my agitated state, I was barely fit to make the remainder of the drive home. *My husband had to hear your song* – this much I knew. He, too, must feel the full impact of your genius. "If the light is OFF..." I said to Richard, who was sitting on the couch doing a crossword when I came in. He looked up, briefly, then returned to his work. This was no time for preoccupation, though, as my silence informed him.

"Sorry," he said, folding his newspaper in half and placing it on the side table next to him. "Go on."

"If the light is OFF..." I said. "Then... Then..." I hesitated. (He's a simple man – who knew what impact this would have on him.)

He motioned for me to continue. "Then," I continued, "well... you see... If it's OFF, then it isn't... ON."

It didn't dawn on him immediately, so I repeated myself. Slowly, and with emphasis. After a moment, I saw the penny drop, his eyes glazing over in wonderment.

"Let me get this straight," he said, rising from the armchair, his voice shaky. "Because the light is OFF..."

"Yes," I said, encouragingly. *That beautiful halfwit had got it!*

"Then it isn't... ON."

"Exactly!" I said, running over to him.

I gripped his forearms, my nails digging into his flesh. There we stood, a good five minutes passing as we gazed at each other in amazement, neither of us blinking. Outside, darkness had set in, and along with it a light drizzle. An ambulance caterwauled past, its lights penetrating the gauze of our living room curtains, strobing the wall in red and blue. When we finally let go of one another, Richard, unsteady on his feet, reached for the counterbalance of my shoulder.

"Then... hold on, hold on," he said, his breath laboured, eyes darting about the room as if chasing an elusive thought. "Then that also means that the reverse might be true... That if the light is ON, it necessarily isn't OFF."

I ran to the light switch.

"It's ON," I said, index finger hovering over the switch. I looked at him to make sure he was with me. He nodded, slowly.

I hit the switch, and the room plunged into darkness.

"And therefore... therefore," I said. I was trembling.

There was silence, followed by a loud thump. I flicked the lights back on to find Richard passed out on the floor.

I'll be straight with you, Duff – this is a little embarrassing for me. I've got a doctorate in astrophysics, and yet somehow, I had *missed it*. I had needed, desperately, to be reminded of the staggering simplicity of it all. The blind indifference with which the physics of the universe conduct themselves. *And where to from here?* Just the other day, I was making a coffee, and in a moment of inspiration, I realised that the same principle could be applied to a variety of household appliances. "Look," I said to Richard, flicking the kettle switch on. "The kettle is on."

"Yes," he said. He was still working on the crossword. "Five across, three letters," he muttered.

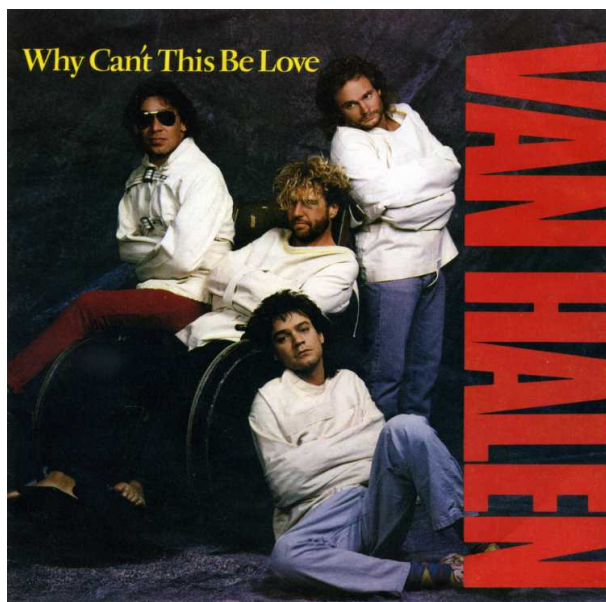
"Richard," I repeated, drumming my fingers on the countertop. He looked up, reluctantly. "The kettle is ON..."

"So?" Richard said. (Sometimes he is infuriatingly obtuse.)

"Therefore, it is NOT off."

But this time, Duff, rather than excitement in his eyes, I saw only fear – a fear that, admittedly, was mirrored in my own.

All this, I guess, is a long way of saying, that while your ideas may be revolutionary on a scale unwitnessed in the 21st century, they're a bit too much for the likes of Richard and me. If we've learnt anything from Van Halen's near-prophetic musings: "only time will tell if we stand the test of time," it's that some ideas will eventually drive you mad.



(Fig. 19) *Coincidence? I think not.*

Your (former) fan,

Betsy.



(Fig. 20)

David, David, David – where do I even begin with this song? There's *too much* to like, that's the problem! And I'm not just talking about your mad mixing, although that's certainly something – I'm talking about your artistic sensibility, your poetic gifting, your ability to compliment a girl 'til it hurts! You state:

*She's nothing like a girl you've ever seen before
 Nothing you can compare to your neighbourhood whore
 I'm tryna find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful
 Damn you're a sexy bitch*

I believe that future generations will see in this song the seeds of fifth-wave feminism. It keeps all the best bits of fourth-wave feminism, equal rights and the rest, but returns some much-needed "flavour" to the formula, a little bit of tasteful and titillating degradation from a man who looks like he's probably not allowed within 50 metres of a school or park.



(Fig. 21) *Aminite?!*

Anyhoo, better run. I'm off to take a stroll past by my local building site. I've been a bit down lately (pregnancy belly, grrr!), but with enough wolf whistles from some randy tradies, I'm sure I'll perk right up! After all, I really *is* a sexy bitch!

P.S. My neighbourhood whore is named Delilah. She's a riot. Who's yours?

With all my love,

Samantha.

TRICKSTER SCHEMA

Finding an outline of key trickster features that could be used as a comparative guide for this project involved ruling out certain past attempts to classify the figure (attempts which, while valuable, would perhaps be more suited to other research projects). Some descriptions proved too broad, such as Victor Turner's discussion of trickster "liminality." While this is certainly a key facet of their identity – tricksters unfailingly exhibit this characteristic – it would have limited my personal observations to one defining feature (however inclusive that feature might be). Other writers, though, due to the specificity of their perceived traits, proved too restrictive. In Barbara Babcock-Abrahams' paper "*A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered*," Abrahams sets out to find the "best" trickster definition, and while she flags V. Turner's diagnosis of liminality as a key trickster trait, she supplements this definition with a comprehensive 16-point schema of shared characteristics.

While she admits that these are only shared "in almost all cases, and to a greater or lesser degree" (1975, 159), attributes such as being "frequently involved in scatological and coprophagous episodes," "follow[ing] the 'principle of motley' in dress," or possessing "an enormous libido without procreative outcome" (1975, 159) prove somewhat limiting. The particularity of these points, I believe, preclude some of the more modern manifestations of the trickster, for whom the infatuation with excrement and excessive sexuality, for example, does not necessarily ring true. My attempt to find a less restrictive schema was eventually identified in the classification system put forward by Hynes and Doty (1997, 34), who reduced these traits significantly while still providing me with a useful, systematic framework. In their book *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms*, Hynes and Doty ascribe the following six traits to the trickster figure:

1. fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous
2. deceiver/trick-player
3. shape-shifter
4. situation-inverter
5. messenger/imitator of the gods
6. sacred/lewd bricoleur

Here we see how broader strokes create room for anomalous trickster figures such as myself, while still subsuming some of the more specific traits outlined by Babcock-Abrahams. Her mention of scatological obsession, for example, could arguably fall under point two considering the frequent use of excrement in tricks or deceptive ruses orchestrated by the trickster. Alternatively, the "lewd"

element of point six could easily incorporate incidents in which the trickster cooks, eats or slings his own excrement. Having provided an outline of the trickster and the broad grading schema against which I will measure our shared traits, the next portion of this chapter addresses the carnivalesque qualities of the trickster figure.

TRICKSTER AND CARNIVAL

In many ways, the links between trickster and carnival are obvious. After all, the “trick” from which the trickster derives his name is a term that is clearly aligned with carnival, be it in the broader understanding of carnival as a “trick” or extended practical joke played on officialdom and extra-carnival life, or in the presence of actual tricks or pranks that occurred during the carnival period. One such activity has already been mentioned in the previous chapter (the election of a boy or “fool” to the position of Bishop during the Feast of Fools), however myriad carnival festivities, both religious and secular, have about them something of the “trick” or “prank.” In *The Reasons of Misrule*, Natalie Zemon Davis says of certain medieval festivities that they involved, amongst other things, “masking, costuming, hiding; charivaris (a noisy, masked demonstration to humiliate some wrong-doer in the community), farces” and that these activities “took place at regular intervals, and whenever the occasion warranted it” (1971, 42). The literature on carnival also frequently makes explicit reference to the trickster figure. Richard Sheppard notes the connection between the folkloric trickster and carnival practices (1983, 116), while Donald Beecher asserts that the same “forces which animate carnival . . . are an inherent part of the trickster essence” (1987, 6). Similarly, Micha Ankory states that the trickster, “who symbolizes more than any other the breaking of boundaries and the meeting between worlds,” is “typically connected with carnival” (2014, 218).

As has been outlined in the previous chapter, Bakhtin’s theorising of the grotesque forms one of the central elements of the carnival. Significantly, the grotesque is also apparent in almost all trickster tales, which typically involve the trickster possessing grossly exaggerated bodily features (particularly the genitals) as well as partaking in lewd acts that involve cross-dressing, copulating, defecating and urinating, amongst many other taboo bodily functions. In Radin’s comprehensive analysis of *The Winnebago Trickster Cycle*, Radin breaks down the tale into 49 sections or episodes, chronologically arranged, and of these episodes, a third refer to eating, defecating, copulating or reference the phallus. They are as follows:

12. Dancing ducks and talking anus

14. Trickster burns anus and eats his own intestines
15. Penis placed in box.
16. Penis sent across water.
20. Changed into woman, Trickster marries chief's son.
23. Trickster and the laxative bulb.
24. Trickster falls in his own excrement.
27. Mothers seek plums while Trickster eats children.
29. Mothers lured in hole by trickster and eaten.
38. Chipmunk causes Trickster to lose part of his penis.
39. Discarded pieces of penis thrown into lake and turn into plants.
45. Mink soils chief's daughter as Trickster planned.

Compare this list with Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque as it features in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

In all the episodes that we have analyzed, and in their separate images, we have seen the grotesque body. Its mighty torrent flows through the entire novel: the dismembered parts, the separate organs . . . the gaping mouths devouring, swallowing, drinking, the defecation, urine, death, birth, childhood, and old age. The bodies are merged with each other or with objects . . . and with the world (1984, 323).

Within the trickster tale we witness a similar "mighty torrent" of the grotesque body interspersed throughout. The story is replete with "dismembered parts" and "separate organs," both those of the trickster, and the trickster as he merges with, or consumes, others' bodies. There are also multiple references to death and birth figured in the consumption and expulsion of matter. Furthermore, are there any more concrete illustration of bodies "merged with each other or . . . with the world" to be found than here in the metamorphosing of trickster's discarded genitals into plant matter?

It might be argued that *my* trickster self is quite removed from the trickster featured above, a character who is often sexually motivated and frequently performs a variety of "obscene" bodily

functions, a distinction which, importantly, influenced my particular choice of grading schema. If this were the case, these connections made between the trickster and carnival (the ultimate goal of which is to connect carnival and myself) might be weakened. Due to the *symbolic* significance of what those urges represent, however, this actually constitutes the strongest point of connection between myself, the trickster and carnival.

Ankory notes that the trickster figure “expresses one of the basic ideas of Carnival: the dialogue between the level of consciousness and structure and the dark and chaotic level” (2014, 218). The “dark and chaotic level” as it manifests in many trickster tales relates to the trickster’s participation in the aforementioned obscene acts, generally sexual in nature. But there are myriad ways in which transgression of this order of “consciousness and structure” can be enacted. If we take as valid Freud’s equation of sexual pleasure with a variety of bodily pleasures, then the sensual pleasure of laughter, for example (the kind often derived from my own involvement in subversive pranks), could be substituted in its place. Furthermore, if sexual desires can be equated with those desires that are repressed in one’s capitulation to the restraints or “structure” of society, then those instances detailed in the following chapters wherein I “break free from,” or eschew, such constraints represent the same acting out of taboo desires enacted by the trickster, regardless of those desires’ outward manifestations.⁸

This link drawn between Carnival and trickster as representatives of the schism between the ego and the id, between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, goes a long way towards explaining the ubiquity of the carnival (and the trickster) in human thought and existence:

The very existence of Carnival as a worldwide phenomenon and the many parallels between its contents and symbols in various cultures testify to its source in the universal foundations of human nature. It is an intensified expression of the eternal conflict between the primal instincts and the demands of culture and society (Ankory 2014, 216).

This conflict, or internal ambiguity, as we have seen, characterises both the trickster and carnival, *but how has this ambiguity expressed itself in my own life?* As will become apparent throughout the remainder of this thesis, many of my actions, recollections, and excerpts taken from diary entries,

⁸ For these and other interrelated reasons, the rest of this thesis refers to the intermingling of the sacred and the *profane* rather than the intermingling of the sacred and the *lewd* mentioned in point six of Hynes and Doty’s schema. Noting a fluidity between the terms “profane” and “lewd,” Hynes and Doty state: “The Oxford English Dictionary suggests a parallel binary contrast here when it lists the original meaning of the word lewd as ‘lay, not in holy orders, not clerical.’ Thus, the fuller background against which the trickster transforms may be the contrast between sacred-clerical and lewd-lay” (1997, 42). Furthermore, throughout *Mythical Trickster Figures*, Hynes and Doty frequently reference trickster behaviour in terms of a transgression of the sacred/profane. For use of the sacred/profane dichotomy in other trickster literature, see Pettazzoni (1956), Babcock-Abrahams (1975), and Koepping (1985).

express a state of indecision, fluidity or even compromised identity. This is apparent not only through the juxtaposition between my capitulation to social norms (as evidenced in my fixation with attaining an idealised female form, for example) and subsequent acts of subversion, but through my doubts concerning the Christian faith and the way in which I negotiate this challenging terrain.

Essentially, religion is a set of beliefs and values or a prevailing worldview, and as such, few other factors in one's life would more influence one's identity than their religious stance. As John Valk notes, "beliefs and values in general are constitutive of the human" (2009, 4). Accordingly, my prevarications over Christianity express a kind of compromised state of being or intrinsically unstable identity. The trickster identity is characterised by a similar deep-seated ambiguity that recalls the carnival spirit and which, as mentioned above, involves this rift between the conscious and subconscious. This often manifests itself in the fluidity between the trickster and culture hero, the oscillation between the more malevolent features of the trickster and the life-affirming, restorative nature of the culture hero. His *literal* shape shifting also functions as an apt metaphor for an ambiguous and unstable identity of the kind that is manifest in certain aspects of my own life, and which will be detailed throughout the following chapters.

"TRICKSTAR"

Despite female tricksters appearing in the folklore of myriad societies, the trickster is rarely identified as female within scholarly writing. As Kristine Holmes states: "Whether we know him as Coyote, Hare, Bottom, Nanabozho, Anansi, or Tom Sawyer, the trickster is usually gendered male" (1995, 45). This is unusual not only because of the array of folkloric female tricksters, but because ambiguity of gender is a prominent feature of trickster identity, the trickster frequently oscillating between the male and female form. Jay Cox highlights this fact in *Dangerous Definitions: Female Tricksters in Contemporary Native American Literature*, noting that "gender has never been a determining factor for trickster" (1989, 19).

In her article, *A Trickster-Like Woman*, Cai discusses the power of utilising trickster discourse within feminist praxis, highlighting its ability to create room for the kind of "androgynous" and "polyvalent" identities which challenge the "gender essentialism and universalism that tarnished feminism of earlier eras" (2008, 286). Rather than relying on the term "trickster" (invariably linked with the male pronoun), Marilyn Jurich coins the alternative epithet "trickstar" at the outset of her book *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature* (1998). In her detailed exploration of various trickstar tales, Jurich examines the myriad creative ways in which trickstars have

challenged oppressive patriarchal norms. She suggests that “because women have been disempowered in so many places for so many centuries, they have had to resort to trickery in order to improve their lives or simply in order to survive” (1998, 18-19). This “trickstar” invoked by Jurich is evident in many of the pranks that will be outlined in the body of this thesis. Channelling the trickstar’s *modus operandi*, the pranks or “tricks” performed by myself are often controversial and subversive, but they become doubly so in light of the fact that they are performed by a woman. As popular shows that focus exclusively on pranking such as *Punk’d* or *Jackass* demonstrate, the genre is generally the domain of the heterosexual male. Women are traditionally much more likely to be the *subject* of pranks than the perpetrators, and in the unlikely event that they are one of the perpetrators, they usually only perform a minor role in the prank’s execution.

In this thesis, I utilise the term “trickstar” for those instances where trickster characteristics are being ascribed to myself or other women.⁹ In this way I add to the existing literature on the trickstar as well as exemplifying the intrinsically subversive nature of tricksters in general. As J. Cox suggests, challenging the trickster-as-male paradigm constitutes the exact kind of insubordination that typifies trickster behaviour. She states: “looking for trickster in unlikely places might just produce the kind of chaotic disordering so characteristic of trickster who eludes, disrupts, and defies classifications of any kind” (1989, 20).

⁹ And where doing so will not cause unnecessary confusion. Unfortunately, the fact that the vast majority of literature on this topic reference the *trickster* specifically (and thus also utilise the male pronoun), I am confined to using that term predominantly, even when these same quotes could just as easily have been applied to the *trickstar*.

Under the pump.



(Fig. 22)

Since PhD scholarship funding only extends so far, and I've become accustomed to a certain lifestyle (ie. the base tier of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), I've taken a weekend job at *undisclosed petrol station.* I joined for the uniform, primarily. It's the way it sits on you. It's the cut of the fabric, the way it takes every one of your best features and says *nothing to see here*. Which is a shame because if there's any time you wouldn't mind looking a little sexy, it's while you're on the forecourt. Dragging a bin behind you. In a fluoro vest that stops people from running you over. I have learned some hard truths on the beat: gas is transparent, 90% of the population are tools, and old ladies do drive-offs.



(Fig. 23)

I didn't see that one coming either, but as age increases, so too does the likelihood that your perp will be a woman. Don't be fooled by their faltering gait, these are psychotic thrill-seekers in Homypeds and control briefs. These are rheumy-eyed dames who'll pinch \$100 premium from under your nose and smile at you on their way out. The rules of who will and won't do drive offs, I've realised, are often counter-intuitive, and vary from station to station, but the following is a general guideline.

People who don't do drive-offs:

Bald head

Receding hairline head

Combover head

Sensible pants

Asians

Old men

Young women

Beachcombers

Nerds

Hipsters

Learners

Missing fingers

People who do:

Commodore drivers

I hate people who drive Commodores. *Wait, don't you mean you hate Commodores?* NO. I hate people who drive Commodores. I drove one for a while, out of necessity, and even I hated me. Sometimes I would just stay at home, attach electrodes to myself and look at images of Commodores while slowly increasing the voltage. Eventually the aversion therapy worked, and I sold the car to some hoodlum who threatened to come bash me up when it died on him. Then I got my brother to call him. Then he messaged me five minutes later begging me to forgive him. *Sometimes it's best not to know.*

Other drive-off red flags:

Very old cars

Very new cars

Missing teeth

Caps

Oakley glasses

Greasy hair

Rear spoilers

Statement tees

Public Service Announcement: if that place blows, don't come to me for help. I forget procedure on a normal day, let alone in the case of an emergency. I'll be the person on the ground screaming "it's the apocalypse, we're all doomed!!!" while people run past me saying "doesn't she work here?" And even if nothing's on fire, I'll be stopping, dropping and rolling, because that's all I seem to remember from any of the safety instructions I've ever been given. Fire – SDR, holdup – SDR, bad hair day – SDR. You can roll your way out of anything, really, providing you do it with chutzpah.

On a less flammable note, I also have a bone to pick with pharmaceutical companies. Or rather, one of my customers does. You would think that on a bottle of lubricant (not the stuff for cars) they would make the barcode extra-large and extra flat so that transactions could take place quickly and discretely. *Not the case.* If anything, they've made the barcodes deliberately small and wrapped them around almost the entire bottle. Which is what I discovered one fateful night when a softly-spoken taxi driver dropped by to purchase a pack of condoms. He'd just paid for his fuel, and after looking over both

shoulders, shuffled what he apparently thought was contraband – condoms and lubricant – across the counter, whispering that he wanted a bag, which was weird because it made me whisper too, even though we were the only people in the store.

The condoms went through fine, but the lubricant wasn't so compliant. I tried numerous angles – I did the side swipe, the up and down swipe, the whirlpool swipe, the close-up-then-far-away swipe, and the magic swipe where I don't even swipe it at all. In the end, I had to enter it manually, and I couldn't remember where the button for doing that was, so I had to fuss around for a while poking things like "staff member discount" and "price override" until I found it, during which time a small queue had started to form behind him. I really wanted to say "slippery little sucker" as I slipped the contraband into his plastic bag, but he looked like he was about to cry, so I just winked at him and said, "have fun with that you pervert."

There are many more tales from my time at *undis* (argh, screw it – it's Coles Express) most of them centring around my questionable work ethic and general incompetency, but they are far too numerous to chronicle here. I will end, instead, on one of my strengths. At my induction, I was forced to watch a twenty-minute-long video detailing what I thought to be common knowledge – namely that one should not attempt to be a "hero" in the event of armed robbery. I don't aspire to be a hero generally, let alone with a gun pointed in my direction, so I passed the test with flying colours.

I'm assuming the sad sacks before me had actually considered taking a bullet for the job, because my boss seemed surprised that I'd passed on my first attempt. Eager to impress, I told her that she was looking at her most *unheroic* employee to date. Under no circumstances, I assured her, would I put the company's wellbeing before my own. This would be as true in the event of a robbery as it would be on your average working day.

"Yep, nothing heroic to see here," I said on my way out, giving her a friendly slap on the back. "Just a Grade A slacker trying to earn a crust."

I'M GROTESQUE!



(Fig. 24)

In this section I examine my links with the carnival grotesque, positioning myself as a “female grotesque” who challenges the notion of an idealised “classical body,” a body characterised by Bakhtin in terms of its boundaries as “entirely finished, completed [and] strictly limited” (1984, 320). Kerry Mallan details the subversive nature of the female grotesque thus: “By transgressing the norms of femininity, the female grotesque refuses the limits imposed on her body and embraces the ambivalent possibilities such transgressions offer” (2000, 26). In eschewing finality or limitation, the female grotesque represents a voice outside the dominant patriarchal order, exhibiting the kind of imaginative subversiveness typical of “the ever unfinished, ever creating body” of Bakhtin’s carnival (Bakhtin 1984, 26). I illustrate my connections with the female grotesque firstly through observing an example from popular culture – Joan Rivers – before reflecting on an example from my own life.

It is worth noting from the outset that women who transgress idealised, “classical” notions of female behaviour and appearance operate under a variety of names. In her analysis of comedian Roseanne, for example, Kathleen Rowe refers to women who exhibit characteristics of the grotesque (such as Roseanne) as “unruly women” (1995). In *Women on Top*, discussing the transgressive behaviour of women within the carnival period, Davis refers to the same kind of woman as “disorderly” (2006). Finally, Mallan notes that women who exhibit aspects of the grotesque have been given myriad titles throughout the ages, among them “*femme fatale*, witch, bitch, hysteric, nymphomaniac” (2000, 26).

While acknowledging that a variety of names can be used to denote the woman I here entitle “female grotesque,” I utilise this term exclusively, given that linking myself to the carnivalesque is the central objective of this thesis.

On the basis of their anatomy alone, women have often been connected to the grotesque, since “reproduction, the bringing forth of life from death, or the threat of death presented through birth, is an area of ‘ambivalence’ which privileges the female” (S. Miller 1996, 75-76). Certainly, Bakhtin’s analysis of the grotesque lays stress on the maternal aspects of the female body and its generative capacity noting, as indicated earlier, that for the grotesque body “the stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it” (1984, 26). Several lines later, Bakhtin goes on to state that “one of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born” (26).

Shannon Miller suggests that attempts at cultural regulation of the female body have traditionally centred around suppressing these grotesque (read transgressive) aspects of the female body. Ideally, she suggests, the grotesque body would be supplanted by the “classical” body:

The traits praised in a woman were a closed mouth, carefully guarded chastity, and limited physical mobility. Ideal female comportment – the maintenance of chastity, silence, and obedience – thus functioned as the limit on an otherwise naturally overflowing, copulating, eating, speaking, wandering body (1996, 76).

As Stallybrass suggests in *Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed*, since the “surveillance” of female bodies invokes the classical body as the ideal form (a form which is essentially mute), the female grotesque has particular subversive potential. He states: “The female grotesque could, indeed, interrogate class and gender hierarchies alike, subverting the enclosed body in the name of a body that is ‘unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits’” (1986, 142).

One of the modes through which this body “transgresses its own limits” is by making one’s “voice” heard, a voice that spills out from one of the many orifices detailed by Bakhtin in his analysis of the grotesque body. Indeed, part of the subversive potential of a woman who exercises her right to speak lies in the symbolic connection between the open mouth and other “openings.” As Nina Puren notes: “The signifier of an intact hymen was a mouth firmly closed, the corollary of course being that an open mouth was the signifier of a whore’s vulva – open to all” (1995, 20). Thus, a woman’s silence ensures she continues to appear chaste, aligned with the classical body, while her vocality connotes sexual permissiveness and the grotesque body.

In *The Laugh of Medusa*, Hélène Cixous similarly links the transgressive potential of a woman to her ability to engage in “speech.” Engaging in speech is ultimately a powerful and subversive act, she argues, because of the fact that it is a domain “governed by the phallus” (1976, 881). Accordingly, she argues that women should “break out of the snare of silence” (1976, 881), or as Roberta Mock rhetorically suggests:

What happens when the ‘other’, who has previously only been described as an object, suddenly acquires her own voice? What if she admits to enjoying food, despising housework, or being sexually voracious? (1999, 106).

In the following portion of this chapter, we hear that voice ring out in the distinctive New York rasp of comedian and female grotesque extraordinaire, Joan Rivers.

IN GOOD COMPANY



When I saw her sex
tape, all I could think
of were
Paris Hilton's poor
parents. The shame,
the shame of the
Hilton family. To have
your daughter do a
porno film... in a
Marriott hotel.

(Fig. 25)

From the very outset, the female stand-up comic is a transgressive figure. She inhabits a space that is not her own not only because it has conventionally been populated by males, but because of a broader perception of females as humourless, women traditionally having been “denied the possession of – hence the practice of – the sense of humour” (Walker 1988, 8). As Helga Kotthoff notes, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud, all notable writers on humour, “reinforced the exclusion of women from the comic arena” (2006, 5).

In his influential work, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger discusses the way that women, from an early age, are conditioned to “survey” themselves, noting that “how [a woman] appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life” (1972, 46). The extensive plastic surgery which Rivers underwent throughout the

course of her life (presumably to make herself more attractive) was one of her most recognisable traits and one which not only signals such self-surveillance, but connects Rivers to the grotesque through the concept of the carnival mask which, according to Bakhtin, “reveals the essence of the grotesque” (1984, 40).

Symbolically speaking, Rivers’ cosmetic surgery (which in later years had altered her face almost beyond recognition) becomes a kind of mask – one that, similar to its role in the carnival, “is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries” (Bakhtin 1984, 40). If “natural,” societal boundaries relegate the female to the role of mere spectacle, in donning a “mask” Rivers enacts the aforementioned “violation” of this natural(ised) position, becoming a voyeur rather than a subject of the gaze. In other words, she is granted the kind of spectatorship generally denied women through the anonymity that the mask affords. But the grotesque is nothing if not ambivalent, and on another level, the mask’s artificial and aesthetically-shocking properties make of Rivers an obvious spectacle, placing her firmly back within the domain of the *gazed-upon* rather than the *gazer*. In a similarly ambivalent manner, Rivers ostensibly accedes to the pressures of Hollywood – and society in general – to maintain or achieve a youthful, beautiful appearance, and yet her continual reference to her surgeries is subversive inasmuch as it undermines the idea that female beauty is meant to be naturally, imperceptibly acquired. As Joanne R. Gilbert notes: “Cosmetic surgery is not talked about precisely because the work women do to achieve a ‘youthful’ and ‘feminine’ appearance is supposed to be invisible” (1997, 319). Rivers’ candour regarding the matter (often referenced by her in interviews or her stand-up routine) can thus be seen as enacting a tacit critique on a society that has set unattainable standards of beauty for women.¹⁰

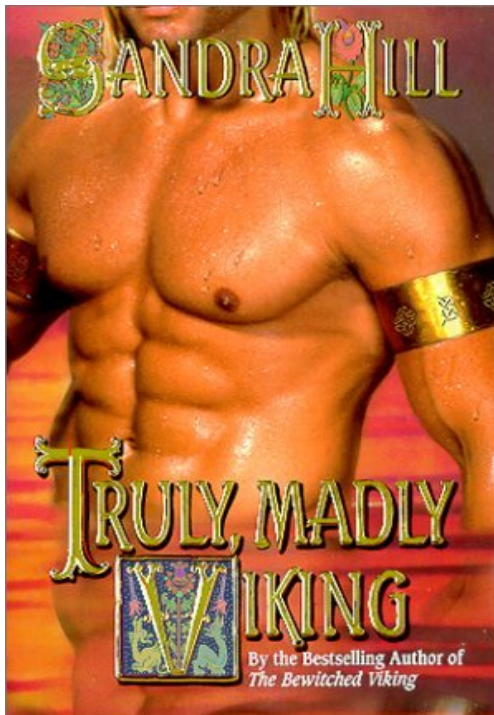
The material bodily lower stratum that defines the grotesque, with its focus on “excrescences” and “orifices” (Bakhtin 1984, 318) also features heavily in her routines, Rivers commenting on, amongst other things, her dry vagina, sagging breasts and incontinency issues. But rather than wallowing in the ignominies of old age, her incorporation of these anecdotes into her comedic routine effects a carnivalisation of the aging body, and seemingly represents a commitment to laugh in the face of death and its attendant drawbacks. Bakhtin describes as a “typical and very strongly expressed grotesque” a famous collection of Kerch terracotta hags who are senile, pregnant and (significantly) laughing. These figures signify, he argues, a “pregnant death, a death that gives birth,” stating: “they combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed” (1984, 25-26). Rivers operates in a similar manner. Rather than facing death with the

¹⁰ It should be emphasised again, however, that Rivers (of her own admission) was in large part *capitulating* to the powerful norms of female beauty and youth which she otherwise continued to subvert in her work as a comedian.

conventional, even obligatory, solemnity (months before Rivers died, she said that “wak[ing] up” was on her “bucket list”) (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon 2014), she uses its approach as more grist for the comedic mill.

Lastly, typical of the grotesque realism which Bakhtin argues centres on degradation, or “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (1984, 19), Rivers’ material routinely addresses taboo subject matter, often conflating the sacred and the profane. In 2013, for example, Rivers drew considerable criticism when she said of German model Heidi Klum that “the last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews into the ovens” (The Niall Boylan Show 2013). Similarly, on an episode of *The Tonight Show*, she apologised for being late, attributing it to the breakdown of the Mercedes she was travelling in, quipping: “the Germans killed 6 million Jews and [they] can’t fix a fucking carburettor!” (The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon 2014).

Romance to burn

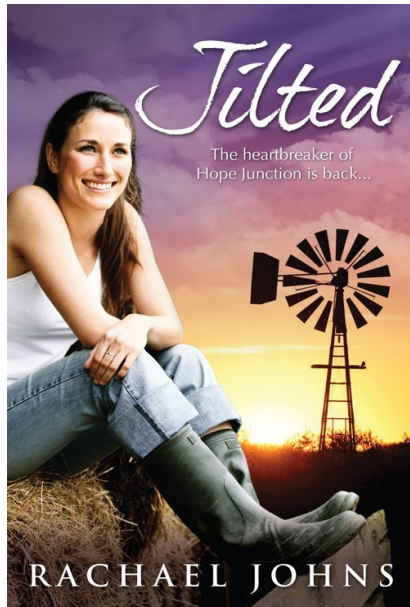


(Fig. 26)

I don't know who Sandra Hill is and whether she's laughing and making a packet, or whether she truly believes that love comes in the form of a (mercifully) thin book about randy she-whales – yes, this features in the blurb – but her statement on the back of the book: "Get ready for the time of your life" is wildly presumptuous. No one in their right mind, *surely*, could have a killer night at home reading a book like *Truly Madly Viking*, a book whose central character has the intellectual and emotional wherewithal of a paving tile. Or could they? Apparently, women and men the world over have been having, if not "the time of their life," then something close to it, with the book averaging a whopping four out of five stars on "*Good Reads*."

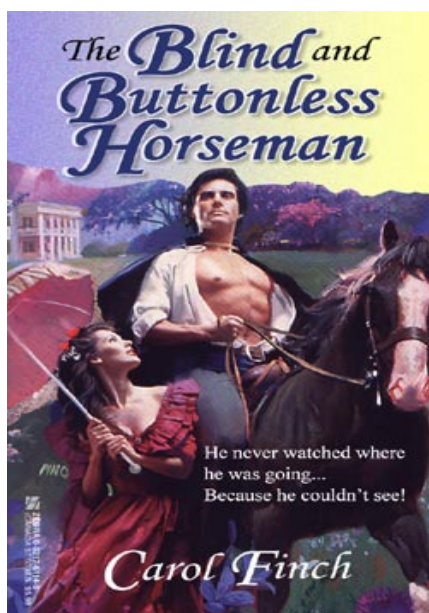
Bodice-rippers as a whole, I learned, are still in huge demand, as are the writers who pen them, with "heat" levels to suit all tastes and predilections. From what I can gather from a quick scan of the internet (you don't actually think I've read one of these novels?), the "mild" category details hand holding, light petting, sexual innuendo – the kind of stuff you'd be happy to gift your grandma at Christmas. From there, more risqué material is included – heaving bosoms, quivering loins and the like. If you're lucky (or very very *unlucky* as the case may be) you might even sight the infamous throbbing member in one of these so-called "hot" level numbers. Once you hit the final tier, though – the "scorcher" – you're on your own. I didn't look, but I'm assuming it involves third degree burns and the novel application of various household implements.

Ranging from the sedate to the scintillating, the titillating to the genuinely traumatising – (I'm looking at you, Fabio Lanzoni) – here is an analysis of several of my favourite romance-related offerings, as well as some insight into the writers that birthed them.



(Fig. 27)

Most people don't like getting jilted, and when they do they don't put on their gumboots and sit on a hay bale thinking *that was awesome*, and grinning like a buffoon. This book was followed up by *Battered to Death*, the cover of which had the same girl laughing uncontrollably and holding a sign that said *let's do this again soon*.



(Fig. 28)

The tragedy is that no one seems to want to buy this stud a new shirt, not even one that says "I'm blind and all they got me was this lousy top." And really, Carol Finch might as well have just called it *The Blind Horseman*, because being buttonless in a Mills and Boon novel is par for the course. I have yet to see one of these books set in the Antarctic, although even in sub-zero conditions I'm sure they'd find a way to strip the protagonist. Something along these lines:

Antonio scaled the snowy cliff face, his rippling muscles aiding him in his perilous quest. Caught on a craggy rock, his shirt tore, revealing the bronzed body of a Norse god. "You'll freeze to death," said Juanita, tears threatening to cloud her large, impossibly blue eyes. "Ha ha, you beguiling she-vixen," said Antonio, "not with my invisible shirt I won't."



(Fig. 29/30/31)

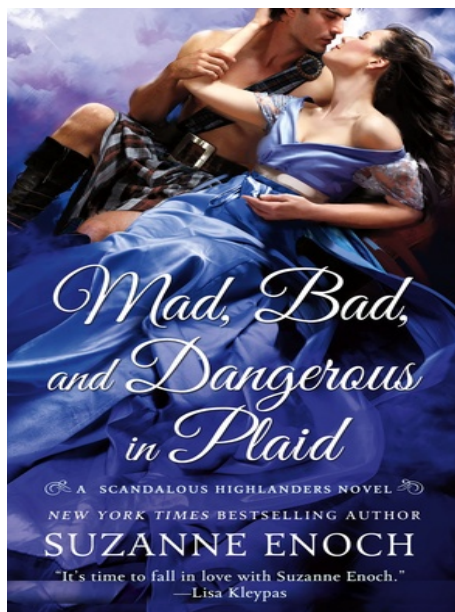
We've all been there.

All her life, Mary Balogh suffered from crippling indecision. "Will you just pick a nipple and stick with it?" her mum would moan, exhausted, as infant Mary latched on and off again for the tenth time that night. The problem was even more marked in adulthood as she flitted from one career choice to the next. "I want to be a doctor," she'd say one evening, only to have signed up for the military come morning. The beauty of this story is that Mary's fear of commitment, once properly directed, spoke to a large and loyal readership who could identify with being wicked, for example, but only *just so*, or tempted, but *not all the way*. Gauging by the success of this particular series of novels, Mary's penchant for prevarication made her more than "slightly" loaded.



(Fig. 32/33/34)

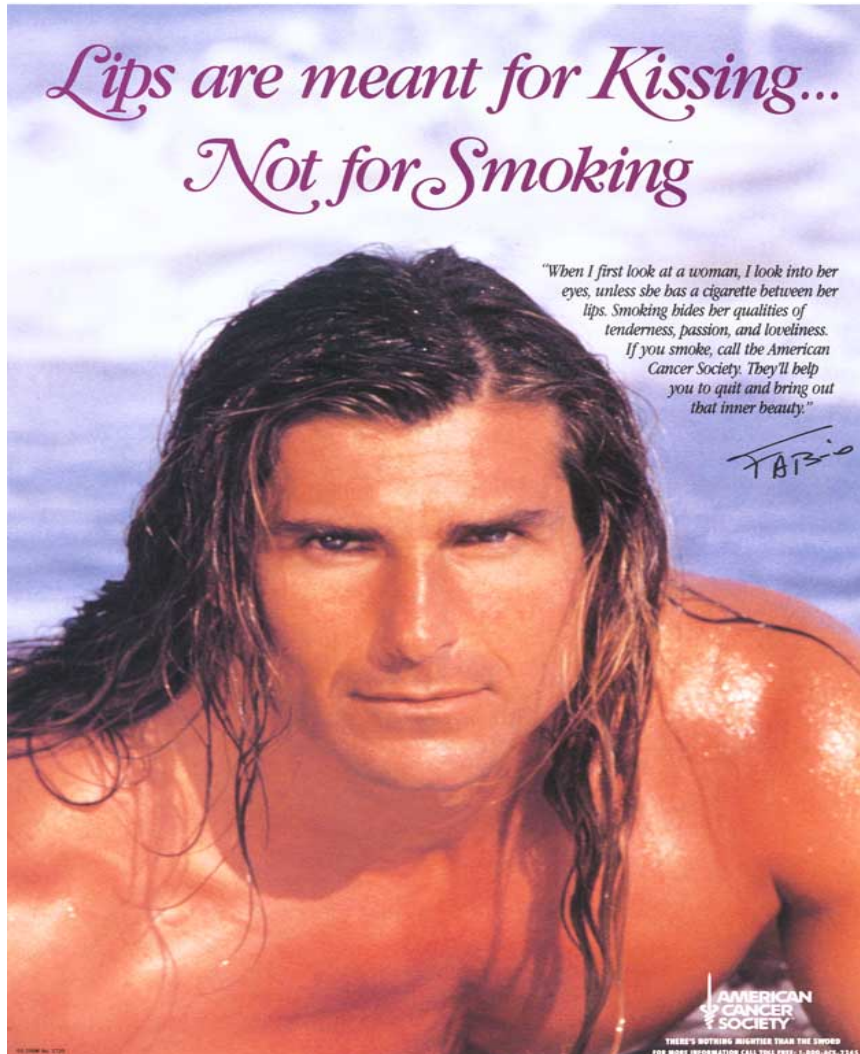
Kresley Cole's first full sentence was "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers," and by the age of five, she could give a near-perfect recitation of Edgar Allen Poe's alliterative masterpiece, *The Raven*. Sadly, the strains of "Nevermore" have yet to haunt Cole as they did Poe's protagonist, with a whopping 35 published works under her belt, all of them making Cole a pretty profitable purveyor of puerile paperbacks.



(Fig. 35)

Rumour has it that Kresley Cole and Suzanne Enoch met at an erotic fiction convention and flipped a coin over who would take which literary devices. Cole managed to keep alliteration, Enoch got assonance, and neither got characterization, theme, style, irony, metaphor or plot. What I like about this particular novel is its ability to challenge our assumptions about the role of fabric in romance

novels. How often has the protagonist been mad in hessian, bad in velvet, or dangerous in leather? Rarely, however, has plaid got a look in. Another racy page turner from my favourite sartorial trailblazer.



(Fig. 36) *Hand me the Marlboros. Quickly.*

When Fabio gets oiled up and stares into your soul with all the intelligence of a half-eaten pizza, you pay attention; mostly because he looks like the love-child of Billy Ray Cyrus and a cross-eyed tangerine. The opportunities for memes here are endless, but I'm trying to wean myself off them, and sometimes that means not superimposing *Mills & Goon* across his forehead.

I've blown this picture up larger than the others not only because it's in keeping with Fabio's ego, but because his pearls of wisdom were too difficult to decipher from far away. Up close, it's even harder. Just in case life-size Fabio is too distracting for the reader, I've included the text below:

"When I first look at a woman, I look into her eyes, unless she has a cigarette between her lips. Smoking hides her qualities of tenderness, passion, and loveliness. If you smoke, call the American Cancer Society. They'll help you to quit and bring out that inner beauty." *Cue Fabio's signature, which is simply his name written down. Fabio has not grasped the concept of a signature.*

From what I can infer, Fabio cannot multi-task. If you light up, Fabio is incapable of seeing anything but the cigarette. Perhaps this is because of his eye condition, perhaps Fabio had to repeat second grade. It's hard to tell, but I'd like to think that Fabio is subtly castigating an industry which has suppressed his immense intellect for too long. Which is what I think he was trying to communicate in this later picture.



(Fig. 37) *Don't pigeonhole me.*

And it's not only his own potential that has been quashed. Fabio feels for the women on the covers of romance novels because they continue to be valued for all the wrong reasons. Because the glass ceiling is still well and truly intact. Well, Fabio won't be a mute accomplice anymore. He wants the world to know: It is a woman's tenderness, loveliness and passion that should inspire.

Although a D-cup certainly wouldn't hurt.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau examines the consumptive practices inherent in everyday activities as diverse as reading, walking and cooking. Rather than viewing the consumer as inert and passive, however, he highlights their potential generative capacity, using terms such as “unrecognized producers,” “poets,” even “trailblazers” to describe them (1988, 34). Despite being limited in their ability to subvert paths etched out by the “strategies” of the powerful, he suggests that consumers regularly create novel, alternative forms of resistance which he labels “tactics.” Since they constitute an “art of the weak” (1988, 37) and have no concrete base from which to operate, they must take place, he argues, in the territory of the powerful.

Seen in light of de Certeau’s theory, Rivers’ ostensible acquiescence to societal pressures through the means mentioned above is arguably a “tactic” deployed within the patriarchal order, or the “territory of the powerful.” De Certeau also discusses a “diversionary practice” he entitles “la perruque” (the French word for wig), which involves a worker utilising his employer’s resources for his own purposes. Importantly, de Certeau is not referring to stealing or absenteeism. Rather he describes the practice as “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (1988, 25). De Certeau states:

The worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family (1988, 25).¹¹

It is through such creative transgressions, de Certeau suggests, that the worker “succeeds in ‘putting one over’ on the established order on its home ground” (1988, 26). In Rivers’ case, we see such creative transgressions against patriarchy or the “established order” operationalised on the “home ground” of a workplace and profession traditionally dominated by males. In an obituary for *The New Yorker*, Michael Schulman notes that “Unlike Roseanne, who later tried to obliterate the standards of domestic womanhood, Rivers wanted everyone to know how hard she was working to observe them. She didn’t want to break the rules, just to expose how unfair they are” (2014).

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler discusses a way of living that I believe embraces the grotesque ambivalence embodied in the figure of Joan Rivers. She argues that it is impossible to escape the fact that we are both formed by, and reliant on, social norms, and that to deny this is to deny reality

¹¹ In my aforementioned administrative role at a university (see p. 21-22), I sometimes used my spare time to write creative pieces for a personal blog. Admittedly, this had more to do with a questionable work ethic than it did a conscious implementation of de Certeau’s theory, but it nonetheless stands as an example of “la perruque.”

altogether. She proposes another way to live, however, one that involves living, as it were, paradoxically:

If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility (2004, 3).

And here, let me briefly invoke the figure of that essentially grotesque figure, the trickstar, who is also “paradox personified” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 148). In *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*, Lori Landay (1998) details the story of ancient trickstar figure Scheherazade. According to legend, King Shahryar responded to his first wife’s infidelity by marrying a new woman every night before having her executed the following morning. When the King weds Scheherazade, however, she invents a creative means of staying her execution: every night she recounts a particularly thrilling tale, but at dawn she falls silent. In doing so, she indefinitely forestalls her death and manages to prolong the conclusion of her story (as well as her life) for 1001 nights. As Landay suggests, Scheherazade’s ruse worked *from within* the patriarchal order to enact its undoing. Scheherazade, as Landay notes, “does not attempt to escape by fleeing or plot to murder Shahryar in his sleep; instead, she transforms the place of her victimization into a base from which to seduce, charm, interest, and most importantly, *change* him” (1998, 3). In short, Scheherazade lives out Butler’s paradox of remaining within a patriarchal order while simultaneously subverting it.

Rivers’ capitulation to the double standards of an industry that venerated its men, renewing their contracts long after a woman of a similar age found her work drying up (a fate Rivers often lamented), expresses the ambivalence of the female grotesque. She is a woman who, like Scheherazade, works from within the confines of a patriarchal society and thus uses whatever means are at her disposal to undermine the status quo. In so doing, the transgressive potential of her actions is not negated, rather it mirrors the carnival which similarly “embraces paradox. . . . Promotes play, elasticity, and diversity; but . . . acknowledges limits, vulnerabilities, and thresholds” (K. J. Schneider 1999, 114).

THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATIONS



(Fig. 38) *Naturally.*

As will become apparent over the rest of the body of this thesis, other instances from my life feature aspects of the carnival grotesque. I specifically devote this chapter to exploring these links, however, because I believe that recounting my struggles with (and subsequent resistance against) an eating disorder provides the reader with a uniquely concrete example of an “unruly” body. Like so many other women in contemporary Western society, I often wish(ed) for the kind of “classical” body which would fit snugly into a pair of size ten jeans. This desire has not disappeared altogether, however it is tempered by humorous acts of rebellion against such oppressive cultural imperatives. Accordingly, I display the ambivalence that is central to the grotesque body, a body which Bakhtin describes as being in the stage of “becoming.”

It's difficult to pinpoint when exactly my eating disorder began, but its origins were apparent years before it became a full-blown “issue.” The following diary excerpts predate the disorder, but show the kind of pervasive body dissatisfaction that provides fertile ground for an eating disorder:

October 13, 2004

I've been really bad with the whole Weigh Down thing at the moment. It's like I'm eating heaps on purpose... I really have got to lose some weight. I went shopping yesterday and in Myer change rooms I got one with a mirror for every angle. It was not a pretty sight.

May 1, 2005

I know looks don't matter, BUT THEY DO!! I'd trade any of my talents in to be beautiful in a flash (so shallow). I was wondering what other attributes I'd trade in the other day and I realised I'd swap anything – singing voice, sense of humour (let's face it, I'm frigging funny!) personality, intelligence (yes, what I lack in self-esteem in some areas, I make up abundantly for in others!)

May 2, 2005

Very tired. I feel incredibly ugly and fat.

May 5, 2005

I feel so ugly and it's so hard to deal with... It's on my mind all of the time. It's making me really depressed. It's really a huge issue with me at the moment. I keep on thinking of girls who I'd love to swap bodies with. It makes me feel really sad when I think about it.

July 19, 2005

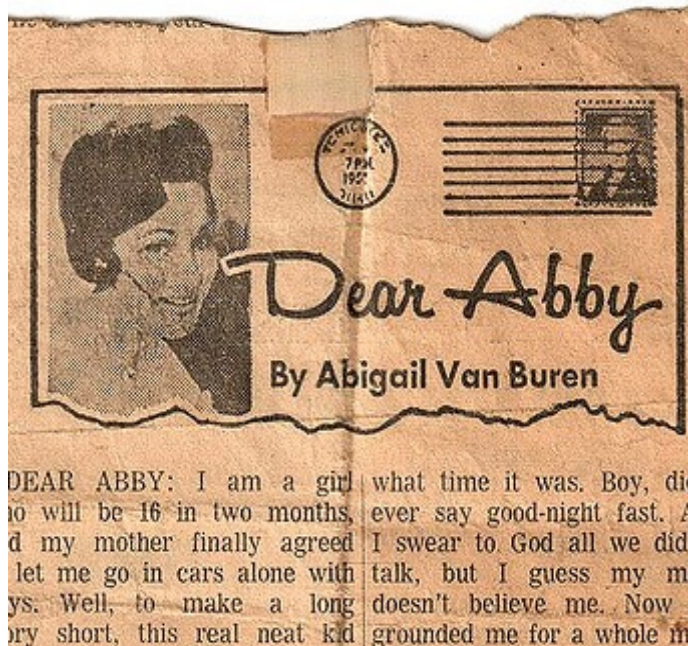
I really need to lose some weight just in general (I just caught a glimpse of my thighs out of the corner of my eye, disgusting).

Despite being concerned with my weight since I left high school (greater freedom surrounding personal eating habits had led to some weight gain), it was only around my 21st birthday that I decided I really wanted to "drop some kilos" and was going to make a concerted effort to achieve that end. Previously I had tried a programme called *Weigh Down* as well as joining *Weight Watchers*, but both had ended with negligible results. This, on the other hand, was going to be "it." In hindsight, I was only mildly overweight, but I was larger than all of my friends, and that was about as bad as it got back then. I embarked on a diet formulated by a weight-loss clinic that claimed to create customised diets based on the "bio-chemical profile of your blood." I never really bought their spiel, but at the time it sounded comfortingly medical and gave the impression that given this new prescription, I would soon return to my God-given (hopefully painfully thin) weight. For about a month I existed on little more than crackers and vegetables – strangely, all of the blood types responded well to semi-starvation – and it worked: by the end of 2005 I was slim.

I may not have had an eating disorder at that stage, but what I'd set in motion was a pattern of disordered eating, an obsession with counting kilojoules that in its final stages involved me obsessing over the number of kilojoules in a celery stick or a can of diet coke. Positive comments from well-

meaning family members and friends only spurred me on in my quest to lose weight, or at the very least strive to maintain my current weight. Because behind every well-meaning weight-loss-related compliment was the subtle implication that there was something wrong, something deficient, with my former body. This is not a blame-placing exercise (I am as guilty of doling out these compliments as any), rather an attempt to highlight Western society's glorification of the slender body, or what Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber refers to in her book *The Cult of Thinness*, as “thinness-worshipping” (2007, 23). Though a small percentage of the male population suffer from eating disorders (a number that, admittedly, continues to rise), the vast majority of individuals suffering from eating disorders are women, a fact that has not escaped feminist thinkers who have viewed the pursuit of thinness (read beauty) as yet another manifestation of a patriarchal rule that demands women embody specific, idealised notions of femininity, or what Judith Butler refers to as “performances” – deviation from which results in “clearly punitive consequences” (1988, 522).

A Word of Advice



(Fig. 39)

Dear Abby,

I've just turned 40 and have started to notice my husband's interest in me waning. There is a new secretary at his office with flotation devices for breasts and I'm scared of losing him to her. What can I do to get him back?

Cathy.

Hi Cathy,

Your predicament is common. Just the other day my own husband told me that my face looked like a discarded rhino hide and could I please, for the love of all that is sacred and holy, do something about it? Sadly, there is no cure-all for man's wandering eye, but let me suggest a few ways to keep the home fires burning!

MAINTAIN your natural beauty. Sadly, some women grow lax in their later years and start to place undue emphasis on what they dubiously term their "personality." I knew one woman who went completely off the rails after her husband, in a drunken stupor, told her he valued her "inner beauty." By the time he'd sobered up, she had cancelled her gym membership, burnt all her bras and was

halfway through her third tub of Häagen-Dazs. (I'll give you one guess as to how that relationship panned out.)

KEEP the right balance. Although the odd display in nature is acceptable, on no occasion should the human male be more attractive than his partner. If you feel you're slipping, try to avoid unflattering lighting, or consider a face transplant. Remember that your husband should always be capable of making the lighthearted remark to family and friends that he is, as it were, "batting out of his league." (If in even the majority of cases he is referring to you, you've scored a home run!).

THIN for the win. As the old saying goes, "it's better to be skinny in hell than obese in heaven" (anon). While thinness is universally attractive, make sure you don't get *too* emaciated. Men like women with a bit of meat on their bones! Avoid full-blown anorexia, but ensure you're thin enough to warrant concern from well-meaning colleagues. If food is too hard to quit, consider nature's godsend: the humble tapeworm. It only took me one month of eating undercooked meat from infected animals to contract one, and while side-effects can include nausea, weakness, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and fatigue, it's a small price to pay for an enviable bod!

PUT your money where your face is. Many over-the-counter products promise to eradicate lines and age spots, but in my personal opinion, only one cream delivers. At \$500 a pop, *Pony Power* isn't cheap, but aged horse semen never is. While the smell takes a little getting used to, you'll love the wrinkle-defying properties of this bad boy. Giddyup!

KISS and make up. As we all know, there's nothing quite so terrifying as the naked female face, but some women seem to think that the occasional skinny dip is reasonable. Those same women lost their husband to the secretary with flotation devices for breasts.

SMILES for miles. Smiling is scientifically proven to make a woman six times more attractive to men. In one clinical trial, men were handed pictures of several women and told to rank them in their preferred order. Of the subjects, the woman who had the biggest smile was consistently chosen. (In what they later saw as a conflicting issue, that lady was also a supermodel.) Make sure that when you smile, you engage your mouth only; never involve the eyes. While you may look dead inside, you'll avoid those dreaded crow's feet!

LOL a lot. Men whose jokes are regularly met with laughter almost never file for divorce. Always laugh *with*, and not *at*, him – the distinction is paramount. Under no circumstances attempt to be funny yourself – this can emasculate a man just as quickly as your stony response to his one-liner. (There is also a direct correlation with lesbianism.)

AVOID comfortable clothing. I have seen happy marriages fold on the introduction of tracksuit pants. They may be snug, but they are also the death knell of desire. Was I tempted to just lounge around in

hospital garb after my third pregnancy tending to my newborn daughter and waiting for my nether regions to repair? Sure! Would I ever do that again? No way! Because it's a slippery slope. One minute you're wearing tracksuit pants, the next you're growing a moustache and talking about equality.

BOTOX, baby! A lifetime of incorrect smiling may have damaged the delicate area around your eyes. Never fear. While advances in medical science may not have cured cancer, they've done something far more important – they've decelerated the aging process! If you can't fit a trip to the clinic into your busy schedule, I recommend hosting a Botox party. Like Tupperware, it's all about the plastic! (Unlike a Tupperware party, the product doesn't come with a lifetime guarantee, so make sure you're vigilant with your upkeep.)

SWEAT it out. Ever wondered if maybe the gym won't bypass your congenital predisposition to store fat around your mid-section? Ever think that you could be doing more worthwhile things with your time than going up and down fake stairs in a bra that is able to reduce bounce by 99.9%? You're probably spending too much time thinking and not enough time on the treadmill.

This list is by no means exhaustive, Cathy. In reality, there are hundreds of ways to stave off the inevitable, most of them requiring only minor adjustments such as sleeping upside down or subsisting on a diet of cabbage and water. Best of luck in your quest to stick it to mother nature, and remember that above all, it's about being comfortable in your own skin. As long as that skin is wrinkle-free!

Best,

Abby.

Many feminist writers have drawn on Foucauldian notions of discipline, surveillance and power to explain women's obsession with dieting and its attendant disorders.¹² In her book *Femininity and Domination*, Bartky details the way in which gendered disciplinary procedures serve to create Foucault's "docile body," a body that is consumed by a process of relentless self-surveillance (1990, 80).



(Fig. 40) *Dead skin, dead marriage.*

In attempting to create what I viewed as the "correct" or socially acceptable body, I enacted the kind of normalising process discussed by Foucault in *Power/Knowledge*. One that, significantly, occurs independent of external force:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself (1980, 155).

Under that gaze, no part of my day was unaccounted for – every mouthful was strictly monitored. *What had I had for breakfast, and how many kilojoules? How did that make me look/feel? Did it make me feel bloated or undesirable? And if so, how was I going to rein in my kilojoule intake for the rest of the day/week?*

In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body*, Bordo discusses the negative implications of a mind/body dualism that casts women on the side of body, and men, the mind.

¹² Notably Bordo (2003), Bartky (1990), and Hesse-Biber (1991).

Western philosophical thought, she argues, has cemented this tacit distinction, bringing with it a variety of adverse side effects:

The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death (2003, 5).

She views, then, the pursuit of the anorexic (and arguably the bulimic since the focus here is on *intent* rather than *outcome*) as a desire to fashion a more masculine body. In the process of losing weight, a female loses those physiological features such as breasts and hips that are representative of the post-pubescent female body. Striving for such an outcome, she suggests, represents an attempt to transcend the aforementioned female “body” with all its limitations and degradations, and become the eternal, pure (male) “mind,” unfettered as it is by earthly constraints.

This goal, or some derivation of it, is clearly articulated in a letter written to my psychologist in 2010. At that stage, I was at the peak of my disorder, and while never being alarmingly skinny, I nonetheless underwent significant emotional and bodily distress to stay at a weight of 58kg. I exercised excessively, was amenorrhoeic and had started vomiting several times a day (an exercise that led, in the long run, to numerous painful and expensive dental procedures). Despite half-heartedly attempting to address my disorder over the course of its lifespan, it was not until a tooth crumbled in half one afternoon that I realised I needed to take some serious steps toward recovery. I enrolled in a five-month course at a clinic that specifically addressed eating disorders, and every week before work attended an hour-long therapy session. The first task set for me by my psychologist was to write a letter to myself summing up how I felt about life, about my weight, about my struggles. The following was written in April 2010:

I've grown ridiculously fat and I look disgusting. I've put on at least five kilos since Christmas and I feel like all my friends have noticed. The funny thing is that I thought I was really fat last year and now I wish so badly that I could return to that weight. I would give anything, ANYTHING, to have a perfect body. Sometimes when I walk around and my hands are by my side, I can feel the huge lumps of fat on the side of my hips and it makes me so desperately sad. When I sit down at work, my fat rolls go over the side of my pants and it's revolting. I wouldn't mind as much if I had a tight body, but I don't. I'm white and I've got lots of cellulite and my skin's saggy. At least if I was firm and brown it wouldn't matter if I was bigger. I'm so sick of waking up and thinking about food – thinking about it throughout the entire day – thinking about what I ate, what I'm going to eat, whether I'll be able to stop, regretting eating whatever I did, and then having to exercise heaps to counteract the kilojoules. I spend a lot of

time fantasising about being able to eat whatever I want without putting on any weight. I just don't want to be in this body anymore. It repulses me. What I would give to escape it, to not be trapped in it and constrained by it. I wish that we could all not have bodies and just float around, disembodied, so people would judge you on the basis of your mind alone. I'm so sad and so tired and just SO sad and jealous. I want it to stop and I want this [sic] work, but I'm also PETRIFIED of putting on weight. I can't think of ANYTHING worse. I just want to be normal. I just want to be skinny.

What is striking about this letter is its articulation of the aforementioned desire to transcend the body. Expressed instead is a desire to become, as it were, that quintessentially masculine mind with all its virtues of rationality, essentialism, transcendence, spirituality. In so doing, I seem to suggest, I would effectively bypass the corporeal limitations of the feminine body; one which has traditionally been viewed as “merely the crude container of the mind” (King 2004, 31).

Regardless of her particular response to that pressure, it is undeniable that contemporary Western society places extreme pressure on a woman to be thin. For multiple and varied reasons, the individual with an eating disorder is unable to resist the call. In other words, thinness is a cultural pressure that only some succumb to in levels that are unhealthy and potentially life-threatening. Carole Spitzack articulates this notion in *The Spectacle of Anorexia Nervosa*, stating:

There is a fragile dividing line between the obsessional tactics of anorexics and the routine beauty rituals of ‘normal’ women. Everyday performances of femininity, as Sandra Lee Bartky shows, require considerable strategy and endurance because they are scripted meticulously and often judged unmercifully (1993, 2).

In the next portion of this chapter, I detail my response to these often-unattainable ideals, and my attempt to subvert the oppressive social norms which demands one obtain the perfect, composed and essentially mute, “classical” body. Such a task involves invoking the female grotesque, thus challenging cultural conformity in a uniquely carnivalesque manner.

UNLICENCED LOLS



(Fig. 41)

I'm 22 and my sister has dropped me off at the Belmont Forum post office. She'll meet me at our designated spot in half an hour; ample time to complete my mission. My hair is unkempt and the roots badly in need of a touch-up – I've worn half of it loose, and the rest is pulled into two buns perched on the top of my head like budding antlers. Dangling from my ears are a pair of cheap earrings purchased for the occasion from a bargain basement store in the shopping centre. They are red hearts dangling within three other sets of hearts and they are exquisitely gaudy – Boy George would have a problem with them. I'm wearing foundation that is several shades too dark, and the cerise-coloured lipstick I've applied well beyond the contours of my lips is bordered by a dark brown lip liner which has, at a glance, given me a Salvador Dali-like moustache. The bright blue eye shadow that covers my entire eye socket and slightly beyond meets the bold blushed circles on my cheek, completing the picture of an insane clown temporarily let loose in the city.

"Next," says the lady at the counter. She hasn't looked up yet – she is still finishing off the paperwork from the woman in front of me. When she finally does, it is with a double take. She recomposes herself – it's rude to stare. "How can I help you?" she says. I remind myself that no matter how uncomfortable I feel, I've done nothing more offensive than apply my makeup in an unorthodox way. Emboldened by this fact, I say confidently "I'm here to renew my driver's licence and update my photo." It has no doubt become apparent to her in the course of our conversation that there is a chunk of lipstick on my front teeth, and that I am quite comfortable with it being there. She is in a compromised position, but I meet her gaze – this is how I wear my makeup, what's it to you? "I've just got to go out back," she says, picking up some papers and shuffling them into a neat pile before exiting through a door behind the

*counter. She stays in there for several minutes. Through a small head-height glass panel, I can see her talking with someone – her superior, I presume – and gesticulating. He glances sideways at me, the same shocked expression passes over his face, and I stifle a laugh.*¹³

I have rarely met anyone for whom the viewing of my driver's licences and the stories related to the arduous, albeit entertaining, task of obtaining them has not provoked laughter, however a reaction that incites mirth is unlikely to be seen as holding much political clout. In *The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought*, John Morreall discusses the general aversion towards humour expressed within Western philosophy from antiquity onwards. These objections, he posits, have their origins in the work of Plato and Aristotle, are expanded upon in the writing of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, and continue to manifest in contemporary thought. Morreall states: "The dominant Western tradition has viewed seriousness as the highest stance, and play, including humor, as merely refreshing us for more seriousness" (1989, 254).

Even my own initial understanding of these pranks was that they were simply a humorous diversion, devoid of any real underlying significance: a comical personal dare, perhaps, or an interesting test of what one could "get away with" on an official document. What was uncovered in the process of my autoethnographic investigation, however, revealed a deeper political import, and constitutes a challenge to the traditional objections mentioned by Morreall, highlighting humour's ability to critically examine the very "serious" ramifications of cultural conformity (in this case the meticulous circumscription of female behaviour and appearance).

This re-evaluation of particular events in one's life is a common feature of the autoethnographic process which involves placing personal phenomena (artefacts, anecdotes, recollections) within a wider cultural, social and political context. Often in the process of doing so, a deeper meaning behind specific events is revealed, or a shift in viewpoint occurs. Discussing the way in which the stories we tell about ourselves are modified over time, Ellis notes:

Our versions change as we age and have new experiences. . . . Thus, reexamining the events we have lived through and the stories we have told about them previously allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have led, the culture in which we have lived, and the work we have done (2016, 13).

¹³ To view the full collection of my driver's licences, see Appendix (p. 239).



(Fig. 42) *Crap. I'd better get a move on.*

Reflecting on these driver's licences and the time frame in which they were situated, I was fascinated to realise that while every year I took the opportunity to dress up in ways which were patently nonconformist, I was simultaneously preoccupied by an eating disorder whose origins were based in a desire to conform.¹⁴ In other words, while I was busy eschewing traditional notions of female beauty, I had nonetheless succumbed to societal pressures that place an inordinate amount of value on a woman's appearance. My capitulation to such pressures is evidenced in another exercise that took place during my therapy sessions in 2010. During one of our meetings, my psychologist asked me to state immediately what came into my head when I thought of being skinny and what particular benefits I thought it entailed. The following responses were recorded in May 2010 and kept with the rest of my therapy notes:

"If I'm smaller, I'd just feel better." (This was then changed to "if I'm smaller, I would just be better.")

"I like being treated as I am when I am smaller."

"Being smaller means I don't need to have accomplished as much."

"I'm valued less if I'm bigger."

¹⁴ The driver's licences, viewed in this context, embody the dialogism and polyvocality which is central to carnival and carnivalesque texts, highlighting the fact that an individual is constituted by a proliferation of both external *and* internal "voices," sometimes collaborating, sometimes competing with each other. This theme of the fractured/complex/ambiguous self runs throughout several of the pieces contained in my "creative" component.

“I like fitting into spaces other people can’t and needing less room than others.”

The words that continue to appear here: “smaller,” “less big,” “take up less room than others,” exhibit a self-effacing logic, a desire to disappear from view, or to at least be *less visible*. In other words, to be the *antithesis* of a spectacle. I was essentially reverting to the classical body – chaste, composed, and above all, silent.

And yet, a curious logic is at work in that these comments coexist with a continuation of dressing up for my driver’s licences – an act that places me very firmly back in the sphere of “spectacle.” The following driver’s licence photograph was taken five months after those words were written, less than halfway through my therapy, and two years before I actually began to recover.



(Fig. 43) *It's complicated.*

Here we see two contradictory desires played out – ones that, I believe, embody the double bind that women often find themselves in. As Helen Malson notes, in Lacanian thought, the woman is associated with an excess, an excess traditionally “not so much celebrated as reviled,” while also representing a lack through a figurative castration (1997, 236). This compromised position, of being both a “lack” and an “excess,” spectacle and non-spectacle, presents an untenable position, one which reaches its most troubling manifestation in the female “spectacle” who is subject to the relentless scrutiny of the male (and female) gaze while also remaining silent, composed and submissive.

Interestingly, Bakhtin describes carnival as the “people’s second life” (1984, 8), and it is in this light that I would like to examine Fig 41. and the connections between myself and the female grotesque. While the difficulties of transcending the double bind outlined by Malson are evident in the previous

excerpts from my therapy sessions, Fig. 41 can be seen as an act that occurs, as it were, within my “second life,” a life beyond officialdom and the “monolithically serious” constraints of everyday life.

My agency, as both Butler and de Certeau have reminded us, is exercised within the territory of the “powerful” (in this instance from within a strictly patriarchal order). Despite this constriction, the humorous “tactic” of dressing up for my driver’s licence nonetheless constitutes an effective form of subversion. To return to de Certeau’s analogy:

Although [consumers] remain within the framework of prescribed *syntaxes* (the temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic organization of places, etc.), these “traverses” remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of *different* interests and desires (1988, 34).

While de Certeau never really touches at any length on humour in his treatise, I believe that humour is another potent tool or “tactic” for undermining the “strategies” of the powerful. Fig. 41 and 43, for example, constitute a comical act of rebellion that operates within the “gaps” of the same system that seeks to contain it.

Since few personal documents carry more weight or are more “official” than a driver’s licence, to have one’s photo taken and licence renewed is to remain within the very “framework of prescribed syntaxes” that de Certeau discusses above. Furthermore, by virtue of its “official,” “governmental” nature and scrupulous monitoring of individuals and identities, the licencing department functions as an apt metaphor for patriarchal rule. If the metaphor works (and I believe it does), then humorously dismissing the licence’s intended purpose constitutes a kind of figurative act of rebellion against patriarchy itself, enacting the grotesque propensity for taking all that is oppressive or “frightening” about “ordinary life” and transforming it into “amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (Bakhtin 1984, 47).

The grotesque (in both the colloquial understanding of the term and the specific Bakhtinian sense) is further evoked in Fig. 41 through my unorthodox and comical (mis)use of makeup. The makeup is so garish and thickly-layered that it evokes the carnival clown, a figure whose primary role, according to Bakhtin, centres around “the transfer of every high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere” (1984, 20). What is interesting is that two “high ceremonial gestures” are being degraded or brought down to the “material sphere” in Fig. 41. The first and most obvious has already been discussed – the co-opting (and ultimate degradation) of the ceremonial act of having one’s licence renewed. But a less obvious, though equally ceremonial “gesture” is simultaneously being degraded, namely the process of successfully applying one’s makeup. Bartky highlights the rigid guidelines surrounding the application of makeup, noting that it constitutes “a highly stylized activity that gives

little rein to self-expression,” stating that the woman who is “novel” or “imaginative” in her approach to applying makeup is “liable to be seen not as an artist but as an eccentric” (1990, 71).

In other words, makeup is limited to one function only; namely as a tool by which women can appear more attractive to others, particularly (but not exclusively) men. And here we see the kind of rigid guidelines which the carnival grotesque seeks to transgress. Importantly, though, it involves a *co-opting* rather than an *erasure*. As we have seen, the grotesque degrades or debases objects, according to Bakhtin, but in such a way that the original object is not eradicated, but renewed. He states:

to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place (1984, 21).

My unorthodox or “eccentric” use of makeup allowed for the grotesque “new birth” outlined by Bakhtin in that it no longer functions as a tool for beautification, but as a vehicle for parodically undermining the policing of what should actually constitute an aesthetic and individualised act of self-expression.

Women, as we have seen, often assume the role of passive spectacle inasmuch as their bodies are the object of surveillance and scrutiny, subject to the male gaze. As Carole Spitzack notes: “Perhaps more important than specific comments directed at women is the presumed *license* to stand in the position of spectator where the female body is concerned” (1993, 5). If the woman is not the *spectator*, then she must necessarily be the spectacle, and the passive spectacle embodies the stasis and finality of the classical body. It is significant, therefore, that my misuse or misappropriation of makeup not only transgresses customary (read classical) notions of beauty, but contra the longstanding tradition of woman-as-spectacle, it involves me – in the same fashion as Rivers – consciously or actively *making* a spectacle of myself.

In her essay *Female Grotesques*, Mary Russo recalls being cautioned as a child against this “specifically feminine danger” of “making a spectacle” of oneself (1997, 318). Doing so, she recalls, could result from something as innocent as “*overly rouged cheeks*, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap” (1997, 319, emphasis mine). Noting a similar imperative for women to embody composure or containment, Catrina Brown states: “From an androcentric lens, women may be seen as talking too much and being too emotional or too needy. The message is that women should ‘tuck themselves in,’ not take up too much space, and not appear to be uncontained” (2007, 122). Coincidentally, the cautionary examples outlined by Russo are similar to the ones contravened in my driver’s licence. The “overly rouged cheeks” are not just an amusing disguise but a comical misappropriation of what is

considered to be makeup's sole purpose. The "voice shrill in laughter" not only expresses amusement, but strips the emperor of his clothes, exposing the absurdity of idealised notions of beauty and containment.

Henri Bergson's influential work, *On Laughter*, suggests that individuals are always at risk of automatization or "mechanisation" and that this mechanisation is diametrically opposed to "life." Man, he claims, is essentially spontaneous and free, however when he tends towards inflexibility of character, it is laughter that acts as a powerful remedial tool, or its "corrective." He states that the comic consists in perceiving "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (2005, 24). Bergson's diagnosis of the function of humour is, I believe, pertinent here, as it reflects the role of humour as it is operating both in Fig. 41, and within the carnival – namely as the (aforementioned) means of "revival and renewal" (Bakhtin 1984, 7). Without the liberating effect of humour, one is able to succumb to the process of mechanisation, a mechanisation which often blinds one to the arbitrary or constructed nature of oppressive cultural norms. Through acts of humorous transgression such as the one outlined above, however, I embody the "unfinished" and "open" grotesque body, an "incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout" (Bakhtin 1984, 27).

Lost in translation



(Fig. 44) *Mind your own crotch.*

Oh, Japan – sweet land of cherry blossom, majestic temples and bottom-rinsing dunnies. I'm here, and it's every bit as good as the infomercials. This isn't my first rodeo, but the last time I was in Asia, I was swiftly whisked away from the airport to an island paradise where everyone spoke Asian Australian and laughed behind my back in English. (It was disconcerting, but at least I could understand.)

I'm in real Asia now, and these guys don't mess around – you can't just tack "le" on to the beginning of everything and hope they'll understand. They'll just look at you blankly but politely, in a way that says *you're an idiot, but I still love and respect you and your extended family.*

I'm over here to present a paper, and uni is footing the flights and accommodation so I'm pretty stoked. The only catch is that my fellow presenters all have very noble-sounding research projects, and mine is starting to look, well... *not* that noble. I attempt to explain my paper to a small circle of people on opening night. The drinks are flowing, and I figure now's a better time than ever to try and drum up some attendees.

"So, I have this history of dressing up for my driver's licences," I begin. A small Asian woman nods her head, eager to hear more. *This is going to be ok*, I think. I give them a few more details – about the nun's habit, my attempts to fabricate a mole – and people start to smile. By the time I get a laugh, I'm convinced of the brilliance of my work. Once these people have grasped the revolutionary nature of my paper, I surmise, their own will seem barely worth presenting. *It's just that it's both wildly funny*

AND theoretically grounded, they'll say to each other, in the hallways, on the way to their next presentation.

"So this one time," I continue, eager not to disappoint my fans, "I'm dressed up as a man, and..."

"But vy on earse would you do zat?" interjects a lanky German woman who has just joined our circle. "Vot's ze point?" A hush falls over the group. The balding man with the research paper on sustainable energy recovers from his laughing fit by coughing and taking rapid gulps of sake. Another man mumbles something about grounded theory and wanders off in the direction of the toilet. The rest of the group swivel their heads towards me in silent affirmation of this woman's insolence.

"It's, er, well... I guess it's funny, for one thing," I say, hopefully, winking at the Asian woman. She stares blankly back.

I eventually convince maybe ten people to come to my presentation – the rest are going to see a guy talk about some algorithm that can eliminate poverty in China. Of the five people that do attend my talk, only two look remotely interested (a young couple who I suspect have wandered in off the street looking for a free lunch). When one is in want of support, however, one will not sing on a few illegal attendees.

With the pesky matter of presentations behind me, I'm on to the business of pleasure, a business I take *very seriously*. The next week will be spent soaking in the cultural confection that is Japan, and wondering, *exactly how much Tonkatsu would one have to consume before they have to be airlifted out of their hotel room with a crane?* The merits of Japan, thus far, in descending order of importance, have been:

Aforementioned douching – It says something about me that my cultural highlight so far has not been traversing the breathtaking grounds of Osaka Castle, or visiting the famed Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima, but the sweet sensation of warm water hitting my nether regions.

Street drinking – like all culturally-advanced societies, one is free to imbibe in public. And imbibe I have. In the street, on the train, in the toilet, and alone, in an auditorium, just before I did my presentation.

Sugary treats – My body would be a train wreck if I was left unattended over here. There are vending machines on almost every street corner. And those vending machines aren't stocked with the usual suspects – there are cakes and exotic treats of all description just waiting to be rescued from their glass prison by this here benevolent tourist.

Dogs – I actually like the Japanese ones. They've got bows in their hair and they look like tiny teddy bears. I even stopped to pat one which was difficult because I had two cans of Asahi in my hand at the time. The lady smiled at me and then walked briskly off. Briskly, but politely. Then laughed about me in Japanese to her friend.

"Ladies Only" carriages on trains – this, I thought, would be really convenient, because I couldn't wait to debrief Season Six of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* with someone. Sadly, all I got was blank stares. And the other women were too busy trading tampons and crying for no reason.

There's really no reason not to love Japan. Apart from the politeness which, I have to say, starts to get a little wearisome after a while. Everyone is so ridiculously nice that I'm starting to think I'm either an awful human being, or the whole of Japan is gaslighting me. Still, it's a real novelty having someone bow after everything you say, even when you're just asking where the nearest toilet is.

After my highly unsuccessful presentation, this kind of behaviour has given me a much-needed ego boost. I've taken to saying things like "go in peace, your devotion has been duly noted," or "bend before me, mortal, for you are in the presence of the Gods." It usually goes down without a hitch, except for that time that I said it to an Asian-looking American who just flipped me off and said, "yeah, Buddha, maybe."

I consoled myself by eating two enormous sushi rolls and a momiji chaser.

TRICKSTAR TALES

Sacred cows make the best hamburgers (Anon).

In this chapter, I will address my connections to the trickstar figure through analysing two humorous acts that took place during the course of writing this thesis. I also examine the dialogism and heteroglossia that is inherent in both of these instances, particularly in relation to their dissemination on social media platforms. Ultimately, I argue that these acts invoke the “gay relativity” of carnival, wherein “all the official certainties are relativized, inverted or parodied” (Dentith 1995, 68).

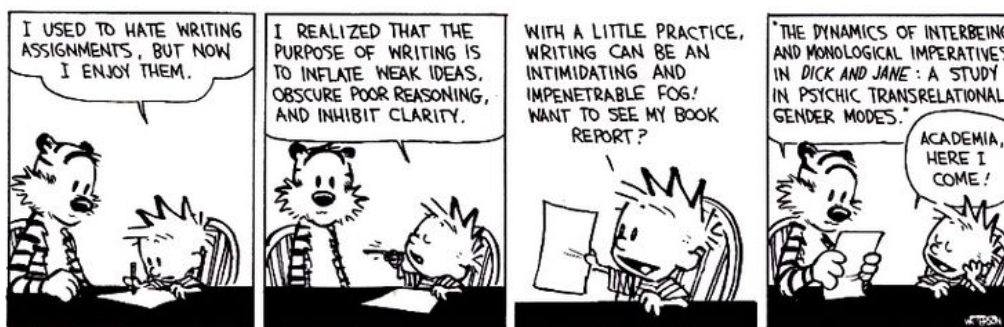
In Kingsley Amis’ novel, *Lucky Jim*, Jim Dixon is a young history professor disillusioned with the academic world in which he circulates, particularly the posturing of his Head of Department, Professor Welch (with whom he maintains contact only in the hope of receiving tenure). In the novel’s climax, an inebriated Dixon delivers a lecture in which he inadvertently mimics the affected mannerisms of Welch and the college principal, much to the delighted amusement of the crowd as well as his love interest’s uncle who shares his misgivings over what he understands to be the effete and overly glorified world of academia. Furthermore, of the material on which he is speaking (“Merrie England”), Dixon comes to the following conclusion mid-speech: “Nobody outside a madhouse . . . could take seriously a single phrase of this conjectural, nugatory, deluded, tedious rubbish” (1957, 230).

While the novel was written in 1950, its satirical attack on the intellectual pretensions of the academic world still resonate with many. Throughout his degree, for example, my brother had regular interaction with a tutor/lecturer (and only recently-graduated PhD student) who insisted on being addressed as “Doctor,” regardless of context, and displayed a general sense of entitlement and superiority that was, well... risible. Although this may be an extreme example, I can testify to similar experiences in my time at university, despite different stages of my tertiary education seeing me enrolled at three different institutions. Furthermore, as the initial (and to some degree ongoing) hostility towards methodologies such as autoethnography illustrate, while universities claim to encourage diverse modes of research, they are firmly rooted in the kind of Western positivism that continues to exclude subversive or non-traditional voices.

Part of the distinctiveness of this thesis, I believe, lies in the fact that it inserts into the usually “dry” style of writing associated with theoretical investigation, comedic “moments” or interruptions. Similarly, colloquialisms are used if I sense that a more formal term might be at odds with the “free and frank,” or idiomatic, language of the carnival marketplace. Such writing destabilises the kind of

conventions which, when contravened, are often met with suspicion (or worse) within academia. Iroquoian author Barbara Mann, for example, claims to have faced criticism over utilising what is known as “sacred clowning, ie., the use of jokes, puns, spoofs, sarcasm, and parody to make a point” within her work, stating:

Whenever I have used this approach in my scholarly writings in the past, about a third of my readers, the ardently Eurocentric third, have met it with little patience and less appreciation. (A couple of manuscript reviewers even once irascibly informed my editor that I was a “snot.” My husband returned his thanks, delighted to finally have *that* in writing.) Snot or not, this reaction reflects little more than a cultural preference, the taste of western academia for staid and hrrrfmiphful discourse welded into prose that is about as lively as a cash receipt (as quoted in Gross 2016, 5).



(Fig. 45)

Vizenor has similarly picked up on this bias, suggesting that academia is fertile ground for trickster subversion. As J. Cox notes, “For Vizenor, trickster’s newest battle-ground is academe and trickster is a word warrior against colonization, popularization, and isolation from a collective tribal identity” (1989, 17). Vizenor is the son of a Danish American mother and Anishinaabe father, and his writing and interviews often target the tendency within anthropology and related fields to appropriate and tame the subversive power of the trickster and trickster folklore. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, he states: “Everything in anthropology is an invention and an extension of the cultural colonialism of Western expansion” (as quoted in Coltelli 1990, 161). Vizenor claims that instead of examining the trickster on its own terms, acknowledging his inability to be neatly classified, “anthropologists have wanted tricksters to become anthropologists” (as quoted in Coltelli 1990, 163).

Vizenor views the sense of play that is so integral to trickster identity as anathema to the academic strivings of anthropologists, whom he perceives to be characterised by a “tragic” worldview. He states: “Most anthropologists deny the possibility of humour and play. . . . If they allow play, they might have to face the fact that they’re losing their power over their images and control of cultures” (Coltelli 1990,

162). Revealingly, Vizenor suggests that even the way that anthropologists approach study of the trickster figure exhibits this mindset, noting that they “seem to have little appreciation for sacred games in tribal creations” (1981, xv). He goes on to offer the following comical insight:

The creation myth that anthropologists never seem to tell is the one where *naanabozho*, the cultural trickster, made the first anthropologist from fecal matter. Once made, more were cloned in graduate schools from the first fecal creation of an anthropologist (1981, xv).

While Vizenor is specifically discussing the field of anthropology here, I believe his critique can be applied more broadly to the monologic seriousness that often characterises academia as a whole, as well as its propensity to *create*, rather than actually *examine*, culture. As Vizenor states:

Anthropologists believe they are right and what they have methodologically constructed is true because of the socioscientific method. . . . Culture doesn’t exist; they invented it. They need culture so they can get Ph.D.s and gain power in universities. And people who have that kind of power control culture, because they control the definitions, the symbols, and the masks they’ve constructed about culture” (Coltelli 1990, 161).

This “construction” of culture perpetuates a self-serving and elitist myth: namely that the voices of the “educated” should be regarded more highly than others’ – a myth that continues to hold sway. In *Popular Culture and High Culture*, Herbert J. Gans suggests that “one of the longest lasting cultural struggles” is not divided along economic lines, but pits “the educated practitioners of high culture against most of the rest of society, rich and poor” (1999, 3).

In Bakhtin’s conception of the carnival, “official” culture is routinely mocked, participants celebrating instead “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (10). While church and state are the main institutions at which Bakhtin takes aim in *Rabelais and His World*, his critique extends to any other oppressive order – in this instance, arguably academia – whose “dogma” “authoritarianism” or “narrow-minded seriousness” (Bakhtin 1984, 3) is in opposition to the carnival spirit. Accordingly, acts of humorous subversion which take aim at the pretensions of academia are essentially carnivalesque in nature. The following prank, I believe, constitutes a carnivalesque act, and embodies Vizenor’s call for “play” within academia. Similarly, it takes up Daniel Morley Johnson’s appeal to scholars that they take “lessons from Naanabozho” and “engage in free thinking, aim our word-arrows carefully, challenge established social norms, skewer sacred cows, and balance good judgment with playfully bad manners” (2010, 208).

DOCTOR SHMOCTOR

On completion of their degree, doctoral graduates are required to either hire or buy specific regalia for their graduation ceremony. The outfit assigned to my brother – the same one subjected to the aforementioned Doctor’s wildly-inflated ego – consisted of a red robe and accompanying black velvet hat, complete with tassel. It was unashamedly ceremonial in nature, recalling clerics or noblemen from ages past. Ironically, despite it signifying an entrance into the workforce (one will supposedly go on to pursue a career in academia having reached the highest qualification within their chosen field), it is completely impractical as a *working* outfit, enacting a tacit distinction between those who make a living doing “hands on” jobs (the body/mind dichotomy here invoked), and those for whom intellectual achievements have freed them from the constraints of manual labour.¹⁵

At face value, this may seem a long bow to draw. However, the *symbolic* significance of one’s attire is not to be underestimated. As is apparent even in the terms used to distinguish between different types of jobs (i.e. “white collar” and “blue collar”), dress operates as a medium by which people are grouped into different social identities. Or to phrase it differently: “Dress as a symbol can be expected to reflect those organizational characteristics that refer to the question, Who am I?, or those characteristics that are believed to be central, enduring, and distinct” (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997, 864-865).

The following pictures detail an excursion my brother and I took into town after collecting his graduation get-up, he in full regalia, and me trailing behind taking snaps of him in various locations and trying not to let the laughter shakes ruin an otherwise good shot. I later posted them to Facebook with the heading: “When it costs \$150 to hire a graduation outfit this demeaning, you better bet it’s hitting the streets,” accompanied by the hashtags: “#postdoclife #dathat #sandwichartist #platooverpints #classroomswithoutborders” (2015).

¹⁵ Having its origins in medieval England (Snodgrass 2015, 1:3), the regalia is particularly (and often comically) ill-suited for hotter climes such as Australia.



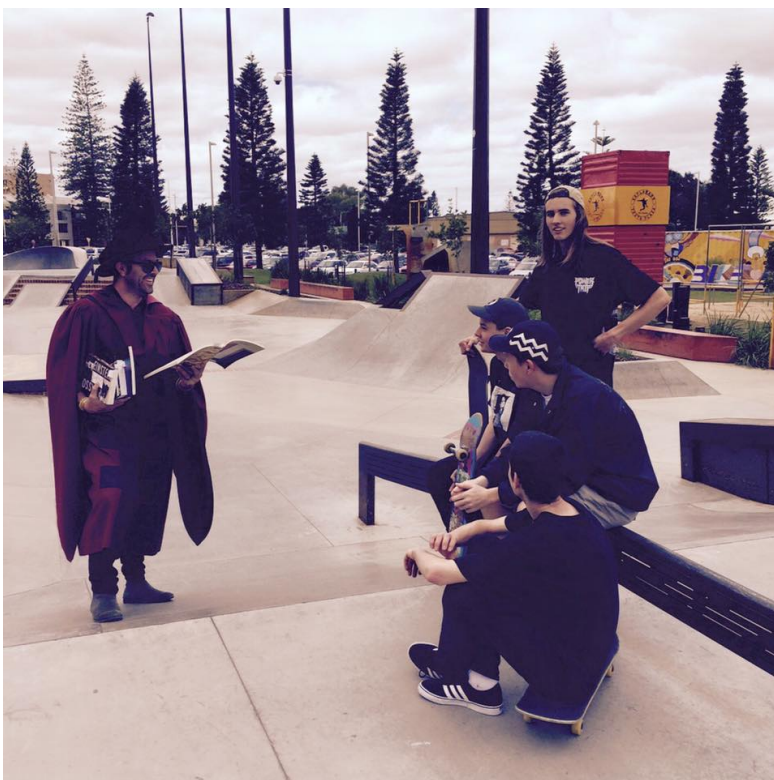
(Fig. 46)



(Fig. 47)



(Fig. 48)



(Fig. 49)



(Fig. 50)



(Fig. 51)



(Fig. 52)



(Fig. 53)



(Fig. 54)

The post generated over a hundred likes, was shared and reposted on other people's pages, as well as garnering a variety of humorous responses. One lady whose husband had finished a doctorate a few years prior to my brother tagged her husband in the post and commented that he hadn't got "full value out of [his] Harry Potter graduation getup" (B. Cox 2015). Another friend (Nelson 2015) remarked that the picture outside the TAB (Fig. 51) was particularly funny – her "fave" – presumably because it expressed the common perception that degrees in the arts rarely result in employment, at least within the field. Expressly voicing this notion, the man whose fishing rod we borrowed in Fig. 47 humorously quipped that completion of his Masters was the reason he was there fishing on a work day. Fig. 51 was doubly humorous, I suspect, because the juxtaposition of my brother in his robes slumped outside a gambling establishment also ridiculed the lofty pretensions and supposed intellectual superiority of someone who has completed a higher degree at university.

Yet another Facebook commenter proposed that we should take suggestions for further photos, stating: "I'd like to see one of [Miik] in a park: perhaps lying down, sleeping, with his bonnet used as a sunshade to cover his face?" (Suttor 2015). All in all, there were 41 comments, to which my brother's eventual response was: "Thanks all, feels like I finished school again yet this time without any friends. Updates – gown v uncomfortable to sleep in, as is bonnet. Sleeves tend to trail and public transport problematic" (Miik Green 2015).

This reappropriation of one's graduation attire for purely comedic purposes flies in the face of the seriousness that typifies academia (particularly at the zenith of one's academic pursuits, where validation rather than a comic degradation of one's achievements is expected). Here we see writ large carnival's "peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à l'envers), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (Bakhtin 1984, 11). Channelling this "inside out" logic, such a comical misappropriation blurs or disregards altogether the distinction between the educated and the supposedly "uneducated" individuals who work, for example, in a takeaway restaurant (Fig. 52), or on a construction site (Fig 53).

Technically, the first thing that my brother accomplished with his Doctorate in Fine Arts was to be a "sandwich artist." This dubious (actual) job title, apart from being risible – next stop "sourdough savant" or "grilled cheese guru" – reveals an underlying presumption that employees working at an establishment like Subway require the counterbalance of an overblown and essentially patronising epithet such as "sandwich artist" in order to distract them from the menial nature of their job. For the qualified or "recognised" artist, then, to adopt the role of "sandwich artist" enacts a symbolic levelling of the kind that occurs within the carnival, as well as being a key trickster trait. As Jace Weaver notes in *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture*:

Trickster can brook no pretension. He punctures pomposity. He turns the world upside down, disordering the normal patterns of tribal life and values and subverting expectations. In this way, he helps keep the world imaginatively in balance (2001, 250).

In some ways, the reader may find this a tad "rich." After all, this is an institution which has provided my brother with many benefits, and will probably result in him earning higher wages as well as gaining him esteem not only within academia, but amongst society in general. Furthermore, perhaps I, too, am implicated in Vizenor's attack on Western scholars' appropriation of the trickster for their own ends. Vizenor states: "The trickster is a comic sign not a trope to power in social science" before going on to note that "this predacious research became an imperative voice in public institutions; the doctrines and taxonomies on tribal encounters have been rewarded with doctorates and academic tenure, the tropes to power in social science" (1993, 192).

I acknowledge the potentiality for hypocrisy here, however I reject the view (one that, for the record, I don't believe Vizenor is advocating) that one surrenders their right to write about or invoke the trickster by virtue of the fact that they work or study within an academic context. If anything, one has an even more intimate knowledge of the more pernicious side of an institution having been ensconced

in it for a considerable period of time. Furthermore, Radin's aforementioned understanding of the trickster as that "speculum mentis wherein is depicted *man's struggle with himself*" (1972, xxiv, emphasis mine) allows claims of hypocrisy to be replaced with an appreciation that an individual is invariably constituted by a variety of differing and conflicting ideals. Some are aligned with the trickster and carnival, others with officialdom and extra-carnival life. Importantly, Radin's quote implies that the role of the trickster includes laughing at oneself, and sometimes this involves laughing from *inside* the very institution one sets out to critique. The joke, in other words, indicts the joker. Joseph Campbell notes in *An Open Life*: "The mind structures a lifestyle, and the fool or trickster represents another whole range of possibilities. He doesn't respect the values that you've set up for yourself, and smashes them" (as quoted in Hynes and Doty 1997, 1).

Saved by the bell.



(Fig. 55)

I'm going to be a student again. Apparently, someone thinks I have what it takes to write a PhD. I left a trail of destruction at the Kmart back to school sale, crushing several primary school students who got between me and the discounted Spirax binders. Mum has been busily labelling my pencils, books and underwear. (We figure M.H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Sixth Edition* should be safe.)

At 30, I imagine I'll be put out to pasture soon, and what better way to spend my sunset years than in the cocoon of academia, where practical skills count for nothing and half-decent essay writing skills are king. I'll be a broken woman come 2017, but right now I'm basking in the glory of my hypothetical doctorate.

The return to academia, however, has brought with it a raft of unanswered questions, most of them pertaining to my previous membership in a secret order known as the *Golden Key Honour Society for Academic Excellence*. My understanding when I paid \$100 to join was that I'd be given an *actual* golden key – preferably 24 karats – and directions to some sequestered door openable only by said key. Upon entering, I would be inducted into the brotherhood by spelling onomatopoeia backwards ten times while being beaten with a hardback edition of *King Lear*. It would be a kind of Sigma Phi, I imagined, for the academically-gifted. We would stage obscure medieval plays, get matching Sanskrit tattoos and use upwards of four-syllable words only. In the outside world, communication would be limited to emergencies (the use of a poorly phrased sentence, for example, or a dangling modifier), and even then, via Morse code.

The particulars of our meetings would be strictly confidential – those who blabbed could face excommunication, even death. Anyone who slipped below a High Distinction would face similar punishment. There would be the occasional animal sacrifice, but it would be reserved for those sad creatures swimming in the shallow end of the gene pool (domesticated turkeys, for example, or sheep). Chimpanzees would be off limits, as would killer whales, elephants and certain breeds of dog. These were our animal equals, and like us, they bore with quiet dignity the weight of their immense intellect.

As it turned out, there were no doors and no keys – only a dubious certificate that I suspect had been printed on recycled paper. (I'm all for saving trees, but surely a few branches could have been sacrificed for the occasion.) My dreams of being part of an exclusive and ethically suspect clique up in flames, I did what any self-respecting person would, and took up Scientology instead.

Still, academia has allowed me to *appear* mildly competent (no mean feat) without necessarily *being* competent. In no other space has my capacity for crapping on about nothing been more welcome, nay lauded. Many times, to recall the tale of the Emperor and his new duds, I can waltz around butt naked without so much as a raised eyebrow. Nowhere was this more apparent than in an Honours class I took a few years back. We were given a picture of beachgoers from different eras; the first from the fifties, and the second from the eighties, and told to do a comparative reading. I couldn't come up with anything that wasn't really stretching it, so I just sat there wondering whether the homing pigeons that took photos of Germany in WW2 had been awarded purple hearts.

It went it's-your-turn silent just before I figured it out, and since I had nothing mildly feasible to add, I said that the first picture (which cut off one of the women at the head) was a kind of mental castration; a tacit reinforcement of the patriarchal objectification of women and the privileging of the female body over the female mind. I was sure this would arouse suspicion because the photo had clearly been cropped for practical reasons, but I had no alternatives (the only contribution I'd had at this point was doodling flowers round the edge of my page and fighting back the urge to draw a moustache on one of the women). It was scary how bad my piffle was; scarier still that it elicited low rumblings of assent from my classmates.

The sad truth is that one day I'll be found out. One day in the near future, when the rubber hits the proverbial, someone's going to notice that I don't have any pants on.

Until then, I'm enjoying the cool breeze on my backside.

THE CASE OF THE MALIGNED MANBUN

In July 2015, my brother was coming towards the end of his PhD in Fine Arts. I was feeling slightly jealous as mine seemed to stretch on ahead of me indefinitely. Returning home one day, he received an anonymous letter in the mail, the text of which read:

“Mate, you seriously got to cut off that stupid looking “topknot” off your head. You totally look like a tool!! Just cut it off and be gone with it! Only a mate would tell ya!!! Trust me!”

At the time of receiving the letter, my brother had what might be considered a “non-traditional” haircut. Colloquially-speaking, it was a “topknot” or “manbun,” and involved a buzzcut to the bottom half of the head, the remaining hair of which was then wound into a small, tight bun. He is an artist, and this kind of avant-garde look suits him well, as though his general unorthodoxy has extended even to his choice in hairstyle.

In George Thorogood & The Destroyers’ 1993 hit, *Get a Haircut* (Marchand 2014), Thorogood sings about a man who is surrounded by people – his own parents included – who equate his unkempt hair with his inability to settle down and get a “real” job as opposed to the “fake” rock star career towards which he aspires. Despite the tongue-in-cheek nature of this song, it is undoubtedly true that there are social implications involved with choosing one particular hairstyle over another, some heralding rebellion towards society, and others conformity to it, or as Connie Koppelman notes in *The Politics of Hair* ultimately toward “any group-determined aesthetic” (1996, 87).

Certain haircuts can not only affect the way that other people perceive the wearer, but can also have real bearing on their employability. While compulsory adherence to a specific haircut/style is confined only to certain professions (the army for example), subtler though equally stringent rules govern other professions: in the case of lawyers, doctors and politicians, for example, short hair which is neatly cut and styled is equated with professionalism, and deviation from this norm could potentially undermine one’s chances of being employed. Additionally, the very term “*manbun*,” which places an emphasis on the gender of the bun-wearer (a female would simply be wearing a bun), already flags the haircut as unorthodox. Whether consciously or not, the male wearer now aligns himself with the feminine, thereby challenging traditional constructions of masculinity.¹⁶

¹⁶ As Maurice Patterson and Richard Elliott rightly note in *Negotiating Masculinities*, the male population is increasingly exercising a process of self-surveillance that was once almost exclusively gynocentric. They state: “now, more than ever, men are being encouraged to gaze upon images of other men and, thus, the gaze, as it is traditionally conceived, is being turned in upon itself” (2002, 236).

My brother has a great sense of humour and the type of amiable personality that makes him well liked by everyone, so the letter shocked him a little, especially considering it came without warning at the end of what had been a difficult week. Although the note was signed off by a “mate,” it was clear that the person had intended it as an insult. My brother laughed it off, however he admitted to me later that he couldn’t help feeling a little upset, and that despite the note’s purportedly “friendly” nature, it resembled more of a personal attack than a comical jibe. What’s more, he didn’t really know in what way to respond (if at all, given the anonymity of the letter).

I decided to write a blog about it on the condition that Miik call the local police station and report a “hate crime” (he has yet to follow through on the dare) after it was published. In doing so, I wanted to respond in a manner that was distinctly carnivalesque in nature, to subject the letter’s overt (and implicit) critique to a form of humorous scrutiny that channelled the carnival spirit. I not only posted the following piece on a blog, but later posted it to my own Facebook page as well as my brother’s. Since I would struggle to think of five friends I have that *aren’t* linked to me on Facebook, the likelihood of the letter-writer being Facebook “friends” with Miik was very high, meaning that he/she would not only potentially see the blog, but would witness others’ responses to it. Here is that piece in its entirety:



(Fig. 56)

For those who haven’t heard, my brother’s coiffeur has been the subject of a malicious, unprovoked attack that affronted not only his tiny man bun, but questioned his sense of style, his

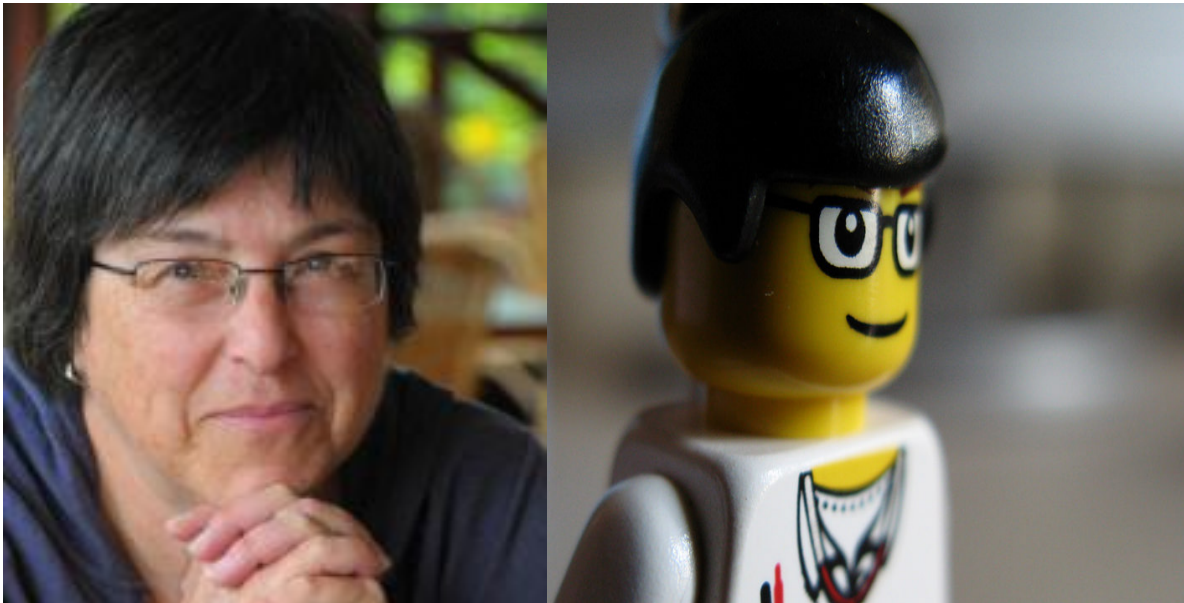
grooming habits and – dare I say it – his sanity. We are not sure yet who the hater is, but we know this much: we are on the hunt for someone who uses scare quotes around established words, we are tracking down the sole person keeping Australia Post in business, and WE WILL FIND CAPS LOCK.



(Fig. 57)

The entire Green family has felt the weight of this attack, as each of us has sported questionable haircuts over the years. I had a mullet in 2003, it was at one stage difficult to distinguish Lucy's head from a bowl, Sez's mercifully short-lived fringe looked like discount Spotlight curtains, and my mum gets told at petrol stations to take off her helmet before entering.

Theories abound: primary suspect being Tony Abbott, who thought it came over in a boat. Second, Rolf Harris, penning another belle lettres from prison, and lastly (this one is a stretch) Mum, who is sick of getting asked by Miik how much Lego pays her in royalties.



(Fig. 58/59) *Uncanny.*

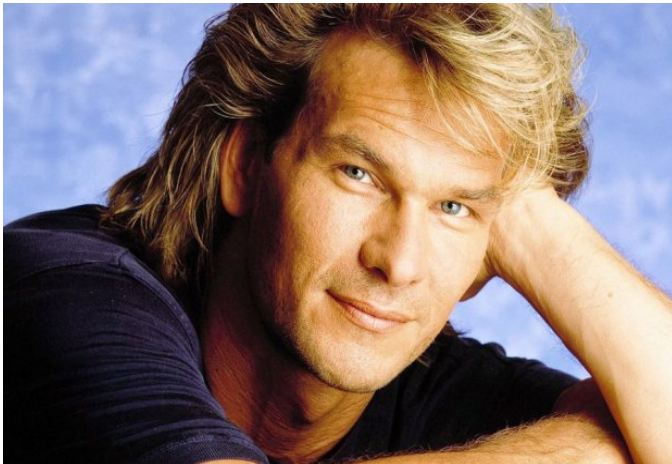
My money is on a Facebook friend, which proves what we've all long suspected – that Facebook contains 1% real friends, 98% people you don't know and a few people that really hate your guts. I also think that it has to be a girl (possibly with a receding hairline which should narrow things down), because we cry when a split end we were fond of gets chopped, and because surely no guy would care enough to think about what another man's hair gets up to on the weekend.

As I mentioned to Miik while he was weeping and cramming chunks of cake into his face, to not expose the perpetrator is to let the terrorists win, and so we will be launching a full-scale criminal investigation. And by "we," I mean Miik, who has promised me that once I've finished this blog, he will ring the police station and ask them to investigate this as a hate crime. I have no doubt that the good folk at Midland police station will take the matter seriously as there are no other problems in the area.

What is particularly troubling about the attack is that the perp didn't just focus on Miik. An innocent bun got hurt in the debacle, which is not really fair, because what did that bun ever do? All he does is ride around atop the head of an artist, which means that the amount of wanky conversations he's had to suffer through are already turning him grey.

If you're reading this, manbun hater, we will not kowtow, and we will not back down. All this has done is prolong man bun's stay of execution. Also know that the long arm of the law will soon be coming your way. The letter on which this hateful note came has already been dusted for fingerprints, and the vitriol with which you no doubt drafted this attack will allow us to swab your flecks of saliva for DNA.

Lastly, I'm curious to know what haircut you would like your "mate" to sport once the "topknot" is gone. I have several excellent suggestions:



(Fig. 60) *Yeow.*



(Fig. 61) *Ice Ice Maybe?*



(Fig. 62) *Define terror.*

Then again, Miik could just go back to his classic mid-90s bob, which was a massive hit with the ladies.



(Fig. 63) *Don't ask.*

The logic behind grouping together these two humorous incidents specifically (our berobed excursion and the above blog on Miik's topknot) is that their respective dissemination on Facebook and Wordpress reinforces the kind of dialogism and heteroglossia that Bakhtin argues is central to carnival. After all, both are social networking platforms that promote, rather than discourage, dialogue.

Dentith notes that "the notion of the 'carnavalesque' can be extended to include all those cultural situations where the authority of a single language of authority is called into question, notably by the

simultaneous co-presence of other languages which can challenge it” (2000, 23). The photo shoot of my brother in his graduation attire, by virtue of its particular mode of dissemination, generated further discussion of the kind favoured by Bakhtin, namely that which is “hostile to all that [is] immortalized and complete” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). In a similar manner, the blog/Facebook post concerning Miik’s topknot or manbun challenged the “closure” of a letter which was anonymous (and thus potentially immune to rejoinders).

The ability to comment on the original material in such forums allows others, in a sense, to author themselves into the text, invariably undermining the stability of any one individual “voice.” In so doing, the essentially dialogic forces of “decentralization and disunification” challenge the univocal or monologic process of “verbal-ideological centralization and unification” (1994a, 272). One woman, for example, wrote the following comment:

I, for one, and [sic] glad this saga continues. I like it that you pointed out the obvious, Miik Green is an artist and we would all be very disappointed if he resorted to conservative hair. I had another look at the writing... I see a very angry hand, very angry.... I suspect a bald person (Walton-Ellery, 2015).

Others simply “liked” or “shared” the blog, made witty comments underneath, or proffered humorous suggestions about the identity of the “perpetrator,” all of which served to undermine monologic (or anti-carnival) discourse, making it instead a place where there existed “a clash of two intentions within a single discourse” (1994b, 195).

Various writers have noted the dialogic elements of new forms of media such as the blog and Facebook.¹⁷ Certainly, the dialogic plurality of “languages” is highly apparent within the blog format which is founded on hypertextuality, or the “electronic linking of a wide range of written texts and images, brought together in a constantly shifting configuration of networks” (Rocamora, 2012, 94). This hypertextuality allows for links to be made between the author’s own work and others’ in which the original text can be supplemented. In a similarly dialogic manner, Facebook allows others to “share” the source material on their own homepage. Doing so means that the work is not only exposed to a wider audience, but now exists within an alternative context, inserted amongst a new set of posts, all of which reflect the particular ideological bent of the “sharer.” A new dialogue is formed, one that co-exists with rather than erases the previous dialogue, exemplifying the dialogism that occurs when we use “someone else’s discourse for [our] own purposes, by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own” (Bakhtin 1994b, 189).

¹⁷ See Landow (2006), Azariah (2012) and J.L. Johnson (2010).

Furthermore, Bakhtin asserts that the carnival allows for “an ideal and at the same time real type of communication, impossible in ordinary life” (1984, 16). While the ubiquity of the blog or ease with which one can join and post to Facebook clearly testifies to the fact that this kind of communication is not “impossible,” what has formerly been impossible prior to the advent of the internet, in general, and these mediums, in particular, is the opportunity for the average person to have their work exposed to a (potentially) vast audience. Thus, these mediums circumvent what might be viewed as the traditional means of distinguishing between the “real” writer and the layman; namely the hard-copy printing of one’s work, overseen by those members of authority who have deemed the work “publishable.” As Samuel Lee notes of blogs (and certainly the same could be said for Facebook), they are an example of “open access publishing with no quality control” (2008, 158). While drawbacks to the fact that anyone can become a writer abound (does anybody really want a breakdown of your menstrual cycle on Facebook?¹⁸), the blog or Facebook post nevertheless enacts an essentially democratising process which enables the gap between “high” and “low” culture to be problematized. Through the sheer volume of people being “published,” it facilitates an intertextuality which opposes monologic discourse.

Lastly, this post, like the photos of Miik in his graduation getup, channels the ambivalence that is so integral to carnival laughter. The work not only undermines other (in)famous individuals who have at some stage sported unconventional haircuts, but my own family, directing the mockery squarely back upon myself/ourselves, invoking Bakhtin’s aforementioned assertion that carnival laughter is all-inclusive, “universal in scope . . . directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants” (1984, 11).

¹⁸ That happened.

The Fright of Your Life



(Fig. 64)

I've discovered horror movies late in life: I still don't love the ones where people's heads are being used as punch bowls, but I don't mind the occasional tasteful blood bath. This doesn't sound that newsworthy unless you appreciate that my childhood aversion to even *vaguely* scary subject matter was less a dislike than a full-blown mental disorder. I made the mistake of watching an episode of *Murder She Wrote* once, and even Angela Lansbury's parachute pants couldn't distract me from the fact that someone had been killed. By someone else. On purpose.

While my case is extreme, I'm definitely not the only kid who's been traumatised by viewing creepy films at a young age. I'm not sure what the go is now at primary school parties, but in my day, it almost always involved watching something like *Children of the Corn* or *Child's Play 3* at the end of the night, which meant that I had to sit in the toilet for the last few hours singing *Kumbaya* until someone picked me up. In the interest of upcoming generations, I've devised the following not-so-scary alternatives to the classics...

A Nightmare on Oak Street.



(Fig. 65)

Running parallel to Elm Street, Oak street is the birthplace of acne-riddled Frederico Kruger, a lonely Hispanic boy with scissors for hands. His dreams of becoming a proctologist in tatters, he now uses his digits for other pursuits, such as decoupage and paper tole.

The Sixth Pence



(Fig. 66) *What happened to my career?*

Impoverished girl in Dickensian London spends five pence on a box of matches before blowing the remaining one on a pack of Twisties. Fagin takes her into his pack of car thieves, and not long after, she and Oliver Twist run off to Vegas to get hitched. Six months later, he swaps her for a bowl of porridge. "Moving", "genre-defying" and "courageous", this anachronistic masterpiece will leave moviegoers worldwide saying "please sir, may I have some more?"

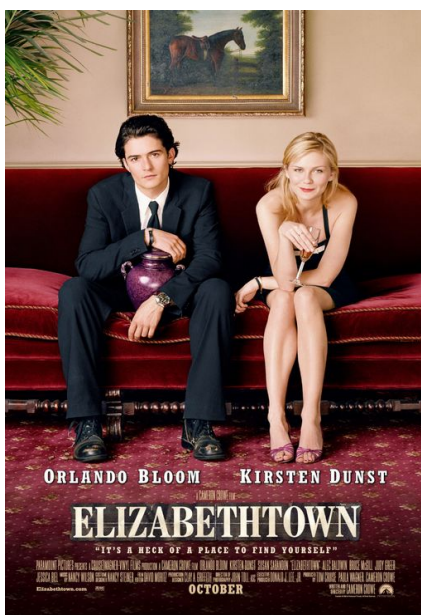
Snakes on a Train (in Maine)



(Fig. 67)

Continuing his obsession with abstract titles, the director of *Snakes on a Plane* brings us *Snakes on a Train in Maine*. The plot is as follows: a guy from New England finds two snakes on a train, throws them out of the carriage and the movie ends just after the opening credits. A lesson David Ellis might have profited from the first time around.

Dullsville



(Fig. 68)

Do not be fooled by *Elizabethtown's* location in the "rom-com" section. No one who has laboured through the original will deny its capacity for inflicting trauma on the least discerning of movie critics.

My re-imagined offering, *Dullsville*, centres around a group of townsfolk forced to sit in a darkened room watching *Elizabethtown* on repeat while being force-fed biltong. (While the premise may be equally as chilling as the original, no clips from the 2003 film are featured.)

Friday 31st: Hockey just got real messed up.



(Fig. 69)

Dyslexic Jason Vorhees misreads his hockey grand final date (Friday 13th), turning up weeks later on the 31st. Still reeling from the truancy of their star player, his embittered team mates beat him with pucks, one of which hits his temple, claiming his life. Frederico Kreuger makes paper chains for his funeral.

The Chair Switch Project



(Fig. 70)

Somebody picks up one chair and switches it with another. Nothing else happens in this minimalist masterpiece, much like the original.

The Philatelist



(Fig. 71) *Me after a big night out.*

Linda Blair is just a normal girl, or is she? She isn't, and her mother is worried. With only a collection of stamps and an elderly mailman for friends, Blair starts to exhibit increasingly bizarre behaviour, one of which is watching season one through eight of *Gilmore Girls*. A priest is called and burns every copy at the house as well as those in all DVD stores within an 8-mile radius. Slowly recovering, her fetish for philately reawakened, she falls in love with the mailman but dies shortly thereafter from spinal injuries originating in her neck. She donates her collection to the Gilmore Girl Recovery Centre in Nevada.

Normal Activity



(Fig. 72)

A young couple move into a new house that they suspect is haunted. *With that low a price tag, something had to be wrong, right?* Wrong. The house, it appears, was heavily discounted due to its location minutes from the freeway, directly opposite an abattoir. The banging door, it turns out, was the result of a loose hinge, the ghostly apparition, car exhaust fumes drifting in through an open window. Some of the deeply *norma*/things that happen during the course of the night is that Katie gets up to go to the toilet twice, and Micah, bless him, keeps stealing all the blankets. A real feel-good for the family.

They're just some ideas – for others, not for me. I got over my fears. I can watch *The Shining* without batting an eyelid. Adulthood, it turns out, necessitates bravery whether you like it or not.

Between the ages of four and seven, I lived in Canada with my family. I don't remember much about my time there, and what I do remember is unreliable, but occasionally I recall snippets when I'm looking through old photo albums or reminiscing with my brother and sisters. I remember walking to school with mum, the snow crunching under my fur-lined pink boots, I remember a slippery slide that we set up in the front yard whenever the temperature rose above 20 degrees, I remember a particularly aggressive case of chicken pox.

I also know that I had a best friend named Ruthie who went to the same church as me and was in the same grade at school. My memories of her are particularly vague. I can't remember whether it was she or I that wore a red tartan pinafore. I know that she had brown hair and a button nose and that she wore her hair in braids.

Every morning, she and her big sister Beth would walk to school together. Beth took the responsibility seriously and had been given the customary instructions: *Always look twice when you cross the road. Make sure you hold Ruthie's hand the entire way. Don't forget to wait for the crosswalk lady to blow her whistle before walking.* And she was vigilant, usually, old beyond her years, but on this particular day she slipped up. She let go of Ruthie's hand, the way one might a balloon, released her for a second as she did something else, perhaps tied a shoelace or turned to talk to a friend. When she looked up again, Ruthie was gone.

I don't know what it's like to lose someone suddenly, but I know something of the pain of a gradual decline. A dad whose pea-sized lump under one eye was cut out, then cut out again, until his face was scarred and hollowed out on one side. A boy came up to him in church once and asked him what had happened to his face, why it looked so funny. His mum was horrified. "Don't be rude," she said, squeezing the boy's hand and apologising to my dad. But he'd just laughed and shrugged it off. I don't think he cared – I imagine he had reconciled himself with the fact that his face looked a bit wonky.

The occasional adult might stare, too. You would wonder at what, and then suddenly twig, tracing

their gaze back to its source – to my dad's sunken, slightly lopsided face and the tear that sometimes ran down the left side, as though he were leaking. But to me he was just dad. I had grown so used to his new appearance that I saw nothing particularly unusual about it.

In a recurring nightmare of mine, I'm inexplicably compelled to write around 80,000 words on one topic, a topic of my own devising. To complicate matters further, it has to make an "original contribution" to knowledge. I have to do it in three years even though it will probably take me two just to figure out what my area of research is, and another year to sort out the referencing. At the end, I'll have to submit it to assessors who will pore over it with a fine toothcomb, looking for dodgy structure, fuzzy logic, shoddy prose. There's the possibility of endless revisions, or worse, a flat-out rejection from the academic community: a don't call us, we'll call you.

I awake in a cold sweat.

But that's only a nightmare, right? That's not the kind of stuff that happens to a nice middle-class Christian girl in 2017.

PRANKING ON POINT

The following body of writing refers to a prank we played on my friend in Sydney in 2013, and serves, I believe, as further illustration of de Certeau's notion that theorising can be enacted in the quotidian, or seemingly non-theoretical, aspects of everyday life. In his introduction to *The Everyday Life Reader*, Ben Highmore notes: "What if theory (the kind that is designated as such) was beneficial for attending to the everyday, not via its systematic interrogations, but through its poetics, its ability to render the familiar strange?" (2002, 3). This notion that "theory" might exist in unlikely or unconventional settings is championed by Highmore, who argues for its potential presence "in the pages of a novel, in a suggestive passage of description in an autobiography, or in the street games of children" (2002, 3).

Highmore's notion of "rendering the familiar strange" reflects the sentiments of Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky who coined the term "defamiliarization" (or *ostranenie*), a process which he claimed was at work in literary or "artistic" language. The use of this kind of language, he suggested, worked to counter "over-automatization," unsettling the reader's expectations. (1965, 12). As opposed to the language of everyday life, literary discourse would enact "a kind of linguistic violence" (Eagleton 2008, 4), challenging habitual responses and assumptions and forcing individuals to perceive their surroundings anew. In *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky states it thus:

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (1965, 12).

A century earlier Samuel Taylor Coleridge espoused analogous views, measuring a poetic work's "power" in terms of its capacity to restore to "old and familiar objects" a "sense of novelty and freshness," of reconciling "sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; *the individual, with the representative*" (2003, 304, emphasis mine). Here we glimpse defamiliarisation's potential for reorienting our notion of the Other and their attendant stereotypes. Since stereotypes work as a heuristic tool, relying on automatic (or habitual) assumptions, they are perfect candidates for the kind of conceptual estrangement that defamiliarisation enacts.

In the prank I am about to detail, the process of defamiliarisation is in full effect, albeit in a non-literary form. More akin to the "street games" mentioned by Highmore, it constitutes a *physical* act of (re)writing that I believe functions to challenge automatic perceptions or stereotypes. In short, it is

the enactment of a pervasive stereotype followed by its undermining, an act which returns to the stone, as it were, its “stoniness,” highlighting the complexity of the individual within the whole.

Pranks are at the heart of the trickster identity. His existence is comprised of events in which people are duped and deceived through various wiles such as shape-shifting, physical disguises and other forms of chicanery (so much so that the terms prankster and trickster, as we have seen, are often interchangeable.) Automatisation does not, and cannot, exist in the world of the trickster – it is antithetical to his very nature as he is constantly shattering taboos and questioning cultural mores (even if doing so involves utilising questionable tactics or methods). In some sense, then, the trickster is an agent of defamiliarisation, allowing, as Hynes and Doty note, others to “elude momentarily the rigidity or demands of their belief system” (1997, 207).

Since the prank involves others’ perceptions of various religions and their adherents, it is perhaps useful to briefly reflect on one aspect of my own personal experience as a Christian (reflections that will be examined further in the following chapter). My observation, particularly in the last decade or so, is that there is a real sense of hostility towards, or at the very least ridicule of, those who profess to be Christians. In a supposedly “tolerant” Australian society, there is a marked prejudice towards people with a differing mindset, particularly if that mindset is informed by a religious world view. While part of this sense of ostracism stems, no doubt, from my own insecurities, I have strong anecdotal evidence to support it. In the first year of my Arts undergraduate, for example, a tutor that I admired stated: “of course, no one here really believes in an actual God anymore,” the tone of his voice highlighting how ridiculous he thought a belief of that kind would be within a university context that valued critical thinking and academic rigour. Despite the patent inaccuracy of that statement, I believe it summed up the viewpoint of many of the people I encountered within university (as evidenced by the affirmative noises heard from classmates).

This had a definite impact – *how could it not* – on what I believed, being someone who sought/seeks approval, and continues to be defined by a conflicting sense of identity. I still remember attending an Orientation Day with a Christian group called *AFES*, manning one of the many stalls highlighting their presence on campus. I had wandered to the café to get lunch and on the way back ran into a lecturer who had always graded me very well, and with whom I had built a strong rapport over the course of my degree. I remember being petrified that he would ask me what I was doing there. The leaflets I was carrying which gave details of a Sunday service running on campus felt as though they were burning through my palms. I prayed that he wouldn’t ask me, only to feel an accompanying sense of shame at my relief when he didn’t. After all, what was I doing there if I didn’t even want someone to know? What I had learnt, though, was that it was better not to say anything than to even suggest that

you might believe in God, because an intelligent or discerning Christian was apparently a contradiction in terms. While the oppression faced by Christians living in Australia is in no way comparable to other countries (during the course of writing of this thesis images of Coptic Christians lined up on a beach about to be beheaded have circulated widely in the media), I argue that a different, ideological form of oppression is nonetheless in effect.

Prominent theologian Stanley Hauerwas discusses this notion in his book *After Christendom*. While similarly acknowledging the lack of more overt forms of prohibition, he argues that a tacit form of proscription is in effect, suggesting that “in countries where [Christians] have freedom of religion it is very difficult to make serious reference to God in the public arena” (1991, 23). Certainly, it has been my personal experience that even something as seemingly innocuous as mentioning having been to church results in, at best, awkward silence, or worse, outright mockery. In *Total Truth* (2008), Nancy Pearcey discusses what she views as an artificial fact/value distinction promulgated in contemporary Western society whereby religious worldviews are seen as existing solely within the domain of personal opinions or values, and thus discounted as actual “knowledge.” Such a view would certainly account, I believe, for the public perception of Christians and their beliefs as intellectually lazy since (at least in contemporary Western society) scientific or empirical knowledge is aligned with logic and fact, and personal opinions/values with the relative and fallible. This bifurcation, I imagine, would go at least some way towards explaining the derogatory statement made by the aforementioned lecturer.

Despite all this, I believe firmly in the notion that everything, religion included – in many cases religion *especially* – should be able to be held up to ridicule, to be humorously tested and probed, and I extend this view not only to Christianity, but to any religion. In *Humour*, Noël Carroll examines various ethical stances on humour ranging from comic ethicism to comic immoralism, finally arguing for a category he entitles “moderate comic moralism,” a position which allows for controversial or (seemingly) immoral humour but acknowledges that such humour loses its potential for amusement “if it mandates audiences to endorse noxious ethical beliefs, emotions, and attitudes” (2014, 116). Short of this, however, the category allows for a freedom that can subject all manner of topics and persons to the kind of interrogation that humour enacts. This is a potentially fruitful stance, one in which no subjects or topics are “off-limits” providing that the context in which they are told is one that does not promulgate “noxious” views or opinions.

I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS SHIITE!

The decision to include this prank in my thesis was a difficult one. Prior to this, the story had only been shared amongst a select group of people. This is not an admission of guilt, but an understanding that context is paramount when it comes to (potentially) offensive jokes. I eventually decided, however, that it had to be included, not only because it constitutes autoethnographic data particularly relevant to my investigation, but because I believe it ultimately subverts rather than reinforces harmful stereotypes.

I'm dying beneath my home-made burqa. It's a humid summer night in Sydney – about 30 degrees – and rivulets of sweat are running down my back, pooling at the base of my spine. Despite the lace shrouding my eyes, I can make out most objects, but breathing is difficult as there's little in the way of ventilation near my mouth or nose.

It's imperative that no part of our body is exposed, though, nothing that might trigger recognition; even our hands have the potential to betray us and are consequently covered by long, black gloves. Waiting is agony, and I hope Sharon will be home from Tropfest soon so that we can put our weeks of hard work into action. Beside me, my friend Jacinta (the newly-minted "Fattoush") sits quietly, no doubt wondering how she is going to get through this without laughing. We all are.



(Fig. 73)

In 2013, my friend and I staged an elaborate two-day-long prank which involved us posing as Muslim women who become increasingly difficult over the course of their stay at our unwitting host/friend Sharon's place in Sydney. The prank was weeks in the making, involving numerous Skype and email

sessions, painstaking background preparation, and various attempts to piece together an outfit that would be, if not entirely accurate, viable.

Pranking has been a part of our friendship since high school. I still recall handing in a g-string (or several hastily-assembled strips of fabric operating under that name) for our final assessment in Year 11 sewing class. It was labelled the “Shazannah” (an amalgam of my friend Susannah and Sharon’s name) and had a crude embroidering of the title on its skimpy triangle front. Needless to say, the offering was not favourably received by my sewing teacher, despite it technically meeting the requirements. But it had provided an outlet for what I saw as a deadeningly boring class, and seemed a humorous alternative to the jeans, t-shirts and dresses that had been handed in by fellow classmates. Over the years, our pranks have become more choreographed, directed at each other, and have needed to be increasingly sophisticated in order to escape detection.

A few weeks before we came to stay, our co-conspirator Mel (Sharon’s housemate and friend) and her mum had a lengthy Skype conversation about two girls who had stayed with Mel’s mum at her home in London. It was orchestrated so that Sharon was in the room for the most of the conversation, and as Mel’s mum often has different people come to stay, it aroused no suspicion. Annoush and Fattoush, she said, were from a group called “Muslims for Jesus,” spoke no English whatsoever, and would be arriving in Perth next month. Could they possibly stay with Sharon, Mel and their other housemates? From our end, Jacinta and I (living at the time in Brisbane and Perth, respectively) organised our outfits and attempted to map out what would be involved, knowing that a lot of it would inevitably be unscripted and dependent on Sharon’s reaction to us and the unfolding situation. Back in Sydney, Mel and the rest of the housemates reinforced the story by dropping our imminent arrival into the conversation whenever Sharon was around and stirring up discussion on the topic. By the time we were ready to actually prank her, Sharon was primed.

When she arrived home, Sharon greeted us with her characteristic friendliness and warmth, emphasising the fact that we were very welcome and complimenting Fattoush on her burqa. We nodded in the polite, bemused way one does when trying to communicate with a foreign-language-speaker, and Mel reminded Sharon of what her mum had said about our lack of English. After a few more pleasantries expressed through gestures, Jacinta and I gave her the gifts we had brought. Amongst them were some expired ginger in a box, colouring in books, and a lock of hair (generously donated by my sister) in a frame. All the presents were wrapped and accompanied by labels with vague Arabic looking flourishes.



(Fig. 74)

Our presents well received, we intimated sleep by resting our head on our hands, but not before we had acted out, in a series of charades, our intention of making breakfast for everyone in the morning. We were tired and keen to get into our normal clothes. And to debrief.

In the morning, we rounded up every spice bottle we could find, sprinkling their contents over a glutinous mass of raw eggs, grated carrot, prunes and sour cream. It was our attempt to fabricate something that looked vaguely like a breakfast from the Middle East, something that would test the level of our new-found friendship. Sharon feigned excitement, giving us both a thumbs-up and rubbing her tummy when we handed her the goods. “I LOVE food from other cultures,” she said as we walked past her and out through the back sliding door with our own plates. “Why are they going outside?” Sharon asked Mel, confused. “Cultural reasons” Mel replied, thinking maybe she had got the dodgy end of the deal. Outside, Jacinta and I scraped our food into the bin and shook with laughter.



(Fig. 75) *Nom nom.*

By this stage, we were beginning to run out of ideas. We had managed to maintain the prank for a lot longer than expected, so any new actions would have to be improvised. Since nothing had as yet aroused even the slightest suspicion, we decided to take it up a notch. When breakfast was over, I began to give Sharon a back massage and motioned for Jacinta to do the same to her feet. We had “discovered” that we could communicate via Google Translate the night before, and so Sharon began to ask us questions about our background. At one point, after saying how much she was appreciating the massage, she asked us if this kind of thing was common practice in our families. Did we all massage each other? Was this something that happened after every meal time? Pretending to be offended by that particular line of enquiry, I stopped massaging her and stormed outside where I began pacing around the yard and knocking over garden chairs. Finally, I sat down on one of the remaining upright chairs, resting my head on the table and pounding my fist against it. Jacinta came out and pretended to console me as Sharon watched through the glass sliding doors, horrified.¹⁹

Shortly after this point, mostly because we were exhausted from the pretence, and mindful of not pushing Sharon over the edge, we revealed our true identity. Unsurprisingly, Sharon got the shock of her life, and it was some hours before she fully recovered. She was so convinced by our act, she said, that had we told her to do so because it was “customary,” she would have “licked the walls.”

Mission accomplished.

¹⁹ Lest the reader feel any undue sympathy towards Sharon at this point, it should be noted that she has been at the helm of some equally perturbing pranks. If anything, she got off *lightly*.

Minority Report



(Fig. 76) *Just got shot ten times. No biggie.*

For those of you not au fait with the term microaggression, it is not, as one might suspect, the act of being flicked with an elastic band at close range. It is something *far more serious*. You can check those antediluvian notions of overt racism, sexism, sizeism and classism at the door – years of research by microaggression scientists has revealed that most “isms” are now near-imperceptible, lurking beneath hitherto innocuous words, sayings, possibly even styles of breathing. It’s only thanks to obscure psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce (who in 1970 finally decided to throw his hat in the ring) that we have the term. And what a relief. Explicit racism and the like was starting to feel a little gauche – here was a chance for people to be casually derogatory by reading a name from the telephone book.

Familiarity with the full range of microaggressions is, naturally, of vital concern to that nebulous lot known as “progressives.” (What exactly they are progressing towards is unknown, even to them, but I suspect that much of it was covered by Orwell in 1984.) And where else do progressives like to loiter than universities, that last bastion of reason, morality and awkward poetry readings?

Between getting wasted and drawing doodles on their desk, a few student activists at UCLA bullied faculty into releasing a list of all possible microaggressions, and it’s a real eye-opener. Thanks to this list, I’m no longer under the illusion that complimenting someone on their shoes is a nice thing to do

(more on that egregious act later), but see it for the teeny weeny act of violence that it is. I've compiled, for the equally ignorant, some key examples of microaggression from the university handbook, as well as several others gleaned from the internet. Ignore at your peril:

1. *I like your shoes (said to a woman after she has presented a university lecture).*

If I had a dollar for every time someone commented on my shoes, I'd be a few dollars richer. My only gripe here is that they haven't mentioned the equally devastating microaggression of NOT having your shoes commented on. Trotting out your best pair only to have them silently overlooked is an act of violence against both the person and the shoes that no amount of therapy can hope to correct.

2. *Where are you from?*

Nothing troubles me more than being asked where I'm from. Yes, it's Redcliffe. No, I don't know any good dealers. (On a side note, I also don't like it when people ask me where I'm *going* – it reminds me that the trajectory of my life has been generally southbound). The interesting thing here is that assuming that asking someone (presumably not Caucasian) where they're from automatically implies an overseas "from" effectively enacts an even more insidious form of microaggression. A person of Indian descent, for example, could easily respond "I'm from Darwin," to which you might reply "Sweet, I've never been there, but I've heard it's shit."

3. *I think we should have our staff retreat at the country club. Let's plan a round of golf.*

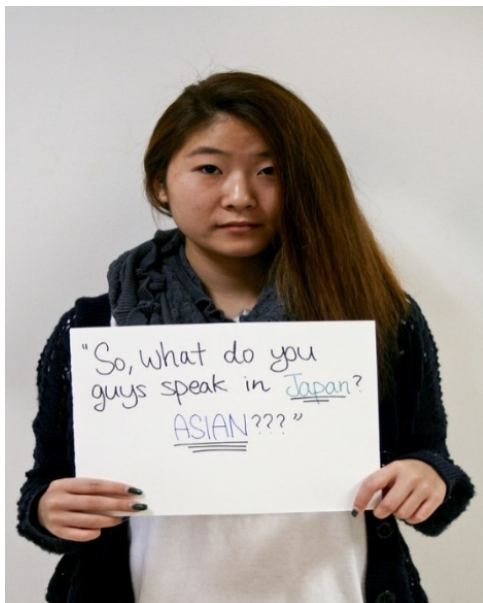
This is not only a lame suggestion, but a microaggression of the highest order. Not all of us can afford to make up for our tiny member with a Porsche, some are forced to do so with a Barina and a rear spoiler. Interestingly, I realised that I was unwittingly the subject of microaggression throughout much of my childhood. Yes, I went to a private school, but was I forced to wear a second-hand blazer? You bet your bottom dollar.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. In Year 10, our school had the audacity to offer the French class a trip to Paris. Did this vagrant go, or was she forced to stay behind, staring long and hard into the face of bone-crushing poverty and social isolation? I'll let the reader decide. Had I known then what I know now, I would have *macro-aggressively* sued the school for damages.

4. *I believe the most qualified person should get the job.*

Imagine if Trump had taken this one to heart? In my opinion, lack of experience should never get between you and your dream job. Sadly, for me, it often has, my lofty aspirations trampled beneath the feet of more "suitable" candidates. In my younger years, I was gainfully employed by Centrelink. For reasons unknown, my primary role in the company was to search for employment elsewhere and then record those attempts in a journal. In what I now identify as a microaggression, Centrelink constantly told me I was looking for work I was "unqualified" for. "You applied for chief neurosurgeon at Royal Perth, Megan?" said a beleaguered fellow employee, rolling her eyes. "I mean, for God's sake, you don't even have an undergraduate." On another occasion: "you rang Channel 7 about their newsreader position? With absolutely no experience in broadcasting?" "Damn straight," I replied, as my associate reached for his stamp. "Susannah Carr can't live forever."

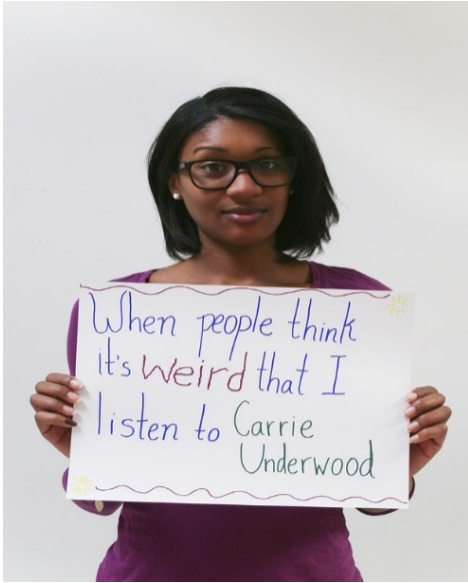
5. *So what do you guys speak in Japan? Asian?*



(Fig. 77)

To be mad at the person who asked this question is to return the microaggression in full. The cognitively delayed (yes, this is an *actual*/term) are not to be derided, even in Asianese.

6. *When people think it's weird that I listen to Carrie Underwood*



(Fig. 78)

It is weird, dude. It's really weird. This is the woman who brought us songs with the following lyrics:

*Stand on the box, stomp your feet, get clapping
Got a real good feeling something bad about to happen*

*Oh oh oh
Oh oh oh
Oh oh oh
Oh oh oh*

*Pulled up to the church but I got so nervous
Had to back it on up, couldn't make it to the service
Grabbed all the cash underneath my mattress
Got a real good feelin' something bad about to happen*

*Oh oh oh
Oh oh oh*

Need I say more?

7. *I don't see colour.*

Not being able to see colour is no laughing matter. If you're old enough, or your family was as poor as mine, you might remember having to watch *Hey Hey it's Saturday* on a small black and white box that was more static than picture. Even worse, you might remember the human rights violation that was

getting up from the couch to change channels. Ugh. Now imagine doing your whole life in greyscale. It'd be worse than having to watch an eternity of *Red Faces*.

8. *Please stand and be recognised*

Imagine being in a wheelchair, hearing this and realising that you can't stand. What you will want next, more than anything, is for everyone to stay seated. Forever. This will improve your sense of worth, your bank balance, even your love life. Heck, with enough self-righteous pity from others, you might even walk again. Interestingly, when I investigated further, I realised that the world of bodily idioms contains a vast store of potential microaggressions, several of which I have listed below:

Keep your chin up – offensive to people with multiple chins, or none to speak of at all.

Stand tall – offensive to the vertically challenged, or what I like to call short people because I'm not a patronising wanker.

Get a foot in the door – offensive to people with no feet.

Lend a hand – same offence, different appendage.

I'm all ears.



(Fig. 79) *Imagine how this guy feels.*

Let one's hair down – offensive to bald people.

See eye to eye – offensive to the blind and Steve Buscemi.

Old hand – offensive to the aged.

Cost an arm and a leg – this one is appalling, because it's classist as well. The next thing you know they'll be challenging amputees to a round of golf.

Don't get me wrong – it's tough being a minority. Quarter Jew that I am, I've known my fair share of heartache, hostility and shame. Still, I wouldn't trade it for ~~all the money in the... most of the money... a small amount of...~~ If anything, I'd actually like to be *more* Jewish, but that's the way the kugel crumbles.

I've got some serious connections in the Jewish community, though – more than enough to make up for the remaining impurity in my blood. Apparently, my great great grandfather Gustus Luber (or G-banger Lubes, as he was known back in the day) brought the scrolls of the Torah over from the UK, as well as founding Perth's first synagogue. On a less verifiable note, my mum claims that we're related to David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister and all round good time guy.

When I press her on this, she is adamant. "It's documented somewhere" she says, before rattling off a list of Jewish names – Presslers and Solomons, Greenbergs and Brecklers, all of them apparently friends or relatives. "*All* of them, mum?" I ask, knowing her fondness for embellishment. "Everybody in Perth who is Jewish is related to me," she says. "*Every single one.*"

Given my illustrious lineage and the fact that mum knows literally every Jew in Perth, you'd think I'd be immune to aggressions from fellow Semites. Wrong. My brief foray into the world of microaggressions has taught me many things, one of those being that haters are just as likely to come from *inside* the fold as out. There will always be someone, somewhere, who will question your identity, your ethnicity, your very person. Such was the case for me recently when my heritage was challenged by a sister of full-blooded (or "real" in her estimation) Jewish descent. It was at my brother's art exhibition, no less. Over an unassuming glass of chardonnay.

I was midway through a speech about the relevance of conceptual art in the age of globalisation when I was interrupted by my mum. She wished to introduce me to a childhood acquaintance. The woman, bedecked in pearls, and doused in what I can only imagine was an entire bottle of perfume, gave me the handshake equivalent of a wet willy and proceeded to add her tawdry two bobs to my already fully-realised musings.

Now I can't recall exactly what turn in conversation prompted me to mention the fact that I was Jewish, but, as my friends often remind me, contextual relevance is seldom required. "You find a way to bring it up, dude," they'll say. "You just do."

"A fellow Jew, eh?" said my new friend, her attention piqued. "And has that always come down through the female line?" She took another sip of her drink, feigning nonchalance and failing miserably.

The room started to spin. My sense of balance deserted me, along with my composure. "Well..." I paused. "Well, technically..." This shmendrik had me by the matzos, and she knew it. She had found the

rot in my family tree and her Jewish stock had skyrocketed.

"Alas," she purred, taking my silence as confirmation. "Alas, you're not *really* Jewish." The kvetch could barely contain her delight. "It has to come down from the woman's side. Always the woman's side." This was not how I was going down, though. Not like this. If the entirety of recorded history has taught us anything, it's that us Jews (quarter or nay) don't go down without a fight. No full-blown minority was going to take my birthright from me. Not tonight. Not ever.

Instead, I referenced the one thing I had on her. The one thing that visibly evidenced my Jewish bloodline. "Your nose," I said, gesturing towards her slender snout. Involuntarily, she raised one hand to it, resting it there. "It's so lovely and small," I said. "So straight." I saw the cogs turning, the triumphant look vanishing from her face, and in its place a rising pink that moved from her cheeks upwards, towards a greying hairline. "I'd give anything to have a nose like that," I continued. "But instead I got *this*." She followed my index finger to the proboscis that serves as my nose, took in its length and width, its tell-tale aquiline curve. Defeat imminent, she muttered something about shmutzy shikses and moved on to greener pastures.

I've never liked my nose. Always wanted it to be smaller, thinner, less obtrusive. But tonight, for the first time in my life, it had served a noble purpose: It had vanquished my microaggressor.

AN UNVEILING

In *Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the tacit forms of racism deployed in contemporary Western society, suggesting that “postmodern” racism is that which occurs when the true identity of the Other is replaced with an “aseptic” or “benign” substitute, noting: “liberal ‘tolerance’ condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance” (1997, 37). When asked for a counter to the political correctness he claims perpetuates more insidious forms of racism, his paradoxical reply is that a different kind of racism, a “progressive racism,” is what is required. Clarifying this notion further, he states:

Of course, racist jokes and so on can be extremely oppressive, humiliating, and so on, but the solution, I think, is to create an atmosphere or to practice these jokes in such a way that they really function as that little bit of obscene contact which establishes true proximity between us (Big Think 2015).

Viewed in this light, our prank can be seen as that “obscene contact” which opens up discussion as to the actual rather than assumed (and reductive) identity and cultural practices of Muslim women, and arguably functions as a way of reconnecting, or gaining “true proximity” with the Other that Žižek describes. To illustrate this point further, Žižek recalls a conversation with two “Native American” men wherein they explained that the politically-correct epithet was offensive inasmuch as it erroneously pitted their “native” or “nature” against white man’s “culture.” The irony, they pointed out, was that research showed that it was the Native Americans, so often “patronisingly elevate[d]” and viewed as “primitive organic living-together-with-mother-nature” who had done more damage to the land and livestock than the assumed “evil” white man. Humorously concluding their argument, Žižek states: “No! Their fundamental right is to be evil also. If we can be evil, why shouldn’t they be evil?” (Big Think 2015). With this in mind, an interesting question that the prank raises might be: had we been two white girls staying with our friend, would Sharon have tolerated equally bad behaviour? And if not, why?

To not include this prank is, I believe (amongst other things), potentially patronising, and I share Žižek’s concern that we avoid “fight[ing] racism in a way which ultimately reproduces if not directly racism itself, at least the conditions for racism” (Big Think 2015). To completely exempt a group of individuals from the universal practice of joking or pranking seems to be a tacit admission that something is lacking, that the thread of their identity is so tenuously formed that one small humorous act such as this could enact its unravelling. Such an omission centralises white man as the only person able to be subjected to humorous analysis, thus reinforcing him as the norm or centre from which all other points

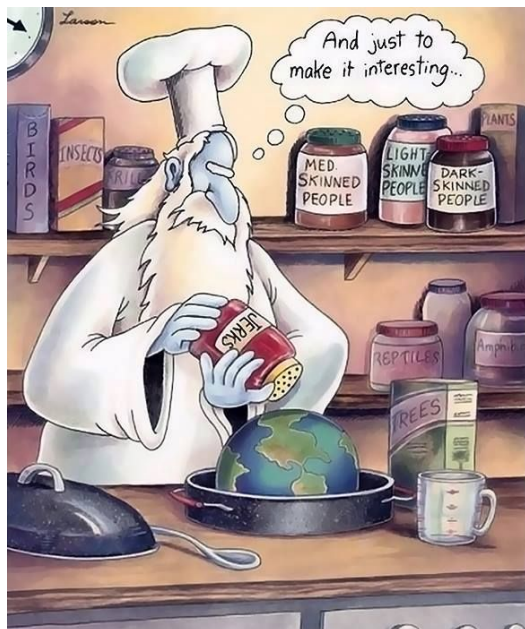
radiate. It is this notion, I believe, that Žižek is critiquing when he notes that “people far from the Western world are allowed to fully assert their particular ethnic identity without being proclaimed essentialist racist identitarians. . . . However, such a prohibition of asserting the particular identity of White Men . . . nonetheless confers on them a central position” (2004, 11-12).

And who, at the end of the day, is the subject of our joke? Is it Muslim women (or more broadly, the Islamic faith), or the preconceptions of our white middle-class friend concerning the Other, and her absolute assurance of their oppression? The answer should be obvious in Sharon’s admission that she would have “licked the walls” had we told her to. Fortunately, Sharon’s stereotyping here did not result in a negative outcome. What it did do, however, was highlight the pervasiveness of stereotypes and the way in which this impacts our interactions with other individuals.

Essentially, I believe this prank operates in a Bergsonian manner, working to remove the “encrusted” (ingrained views and perceptions of a certain group of individuals) off the “living” (a religion which, in 2015, had an estimated 1.8 billion adherents) (Lipka 2017). It does so by placing the stereotype before our eyes, exposing the assumptions we might otherwise form about a large number of the people we interact with on a daily basis. In doing so, we are able to perceive things afresh, an effect which resembles the “turnabout” Bakhtin attributes to the carnival, whereby there is a “continual shifting from top to bottom [and] from front to rear” (Bakhtin 1984, 11).

CHRISTIANITY AND CARNIVAL: A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

What I will argue in this chapter is that I practice something akin to a Carnival Christianity, by which I mean I exercise the key carnivalesque trait of directing critical laughter towards myself and my beliefs, as well as the kind of grotesque ambivalence which defies philosophical finality or closure and recognises the slippage between my Christian ideals and the realisation of those same ideals in my life. I also seek to show that while in his work on carnival, Bakhtin ostensibly directs his critique towards the church (and presumably Christianity), there are more links between Christianity and carnival than might initially be apparent.



(Fig. 81)

A CARNIVAL CHRISTIANITY

Navigating identity, especially in relation to religion and faith, has always been a site of struggle for me. Since I'm the daughter of a Presbyterian pastor, Christianity has always been a large part of my life. And yet God sometimes seems to me a distant figure, far different from the one detailed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. On many nights growing up, dinner would be followed by devotions, and I recall as a child (and through my teens) wanting to know the answer to difficult questions long after my brother and sisters had left the table. Many of those questions remain: *If God created us, and gave us our entire being, then how can we be held responsible for our actions? Why didn't God just create Heaven to start with if it's going to be the realisation of both free will and moral perfection? If God*

knew in advance that creating the world would bring with it all kinds of evil and suffering, why did he still go ahead with it?

I am grateful for a family in which doubts like these were encouraged, but there is nonetheless a point, one which I am still struggling to reach, at which you make a solid commitment. The Christianity that my family practices is not a nominal, attend-church-every-now-and-then kind of Christianity, but the central factor around which they organise their lives, and as such, my position often seems weak in comparison. Still, there is something that I can't seem to let go of. (Or, as the case may be, something that won't let go of me.)

Despite Nietzsche's confident assertion well over a century ago that "God is dead," his existence (or non-existence) remains one of the prevailing questions of our age, as evidenced by the vast body of scholarly work that continues to address this issue.²⁰ If this is the case, then existential questioning of this nature (especially for someone with a sceptical bent) is particularly amplified if you have grown up in the church. Below are several excerpts from a journal I kept between 2004 and 2008:

1 June, 2007

"You don't learn to believe, you believe to learn."

8 June 2007

I so don't understand, but I trust you, Lord. It's so easy to love you, isn't it?!

10 August 2007

Lord, I've hit rock bottom. I don't know who I am, I don't know how I'm going to survive, I know that I need you, but I don't know how to communicate with you. I'm scared of what other people will think.

12 October 2007

I haven't put you first, I've been struggling, struggling, struggling, and still am, to do life on my own and thinking I can give you a nod every now and then. Lord, how am I going to change my ways?

22 October 2007

Just because the alternative is grim (of God not being real) doesn't necessarily mean that you can just believe.

²⁰ See Dawkins (2006), McGrath (2015), Steinberger (2013), Glass (2017) and Williamson and Yancey (2013).

26 November 2007

I'm pretty positive God just spoke to me. "I will provide" came into my head. The reason I feel this wasn't me making up a verse was a) I'd never have picked that, and b) I cannot put my finger on it but God's voice is much quieter (for want of a better word) than my thoughts. It kind of appeared without any brain movement. It didn't pop up, it just kind of materialised.

28 December 2007

Lord – I believe. Help me in my unbelief.

Although entries similar to these appear frequently throughout the journal, this collection of entries is particularly striking in that there is such marked oscillation between faith and lack thereof within the period of a few months. (The last entry is both a paraphrasing of a paradoxical statement from the Gospel of Mark and, it would seem, a succinct encapsulation of my position.)

I include the above journal excerpts in order to further illuminate my "position" as a Christian, and to provide the clearest backdrop against which one can assess the validity of my claims to have exercised a "Carnival Christianity." The prevarications detailed above, for example, highlight a bond with the grotesque body and its "ever incompleted character of being" (1984, 32). What should be evident from the sentiments expressed in this journal is that my Christian faith is a tenuous and shifting one. I imagine that this will be something that characterises my faith for the entirety of my life; that my beliefs will at times be strong, at other times weak, and liable to fluctuate depending on my mood, the research I undertake, discussions with others and personal experience.

Formulating an exact classification of my religious position is a difficult, if not impossible, task, but in the course of my investigation, I came across research that at least attempted to provide some broad distinctions between different types of faith. In particular, the work of C. Daniel Batson and W. Larry Ventis offered a useful delineation between three major approaches to religion, one of which proved useful for me. Batson and Ventis note at the outset of their book *The Religious Experience: A Social-Psychological Perspective* that while their research is scientifically grounded it "does not do violence to the diversity and mystery of the religious experience" (1982, v). Prior to their research, social psychologists had generally used the terms "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" to delineate between different approaches to religion. As Gordon W. Allport and J. Michael Ross note in their influential 1967 paper *Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice*: "Perhaps the briefest way to characterize the two poles of subjective religion is to say that the extrinsically motivated person *uses* his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated *lives* his religion" (434).

These distinctions were useful inasmuch as I could see the position of members of my family, whose Christianity was clearly intrinsic, performed not for convenience or utility, but out of an internally-motivated love for God and a belief that following Him is the best way to live one's life. These categories on their own, however, would have done little to help me outline my own position as I fit in neither the intrinsic category with its all-encompassing nature, or the extrinsic with its desire to gain something from one's religion. Batson and Ventis later proposed a third category which they entitled "religion as quest." As Batson notes in a later paper co-written with Patricia A. Schoenrade, "religion as quest . . . involves honestly facing existential questions in their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers" (1991, 417). The two go on to define the possessor of such a religious mindset as someone who "recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters" but that, regardless of this, "the questions are deemed important, and, *however tentative and subject to change*, answers are sought" (1991, 417, emphasis mine). Here we see a philosophically ambivalent orientation which aligns itself with the dialogic and "the image of the contradictory, perpetually becoming and unfinished being" (Bakhtin 1984, 118) articulated in carnivalesque images and practices.

The fact that I sit in this category became apparent in the course of dating a guy who wasn't a Christian. Obviously, we faced the kind of ideological and epistemological differences that one would expect given our different worldviews, but the real issue was not so much that he didn't believe in Christianity, but that he wasn't particularly interested in *the possibility of God*. I wasn't trying to convert him (how could I when my own position was so tenuous?) but I hoped that he would share with me, if not my beliefs, then at least some of the same existential doubts. I believe that the juxtaposition between our two mindsets further illustrates my alignment with the "religion as quest" category, wherein my beliefs, however "tentative and subject to change" they may be, are nonetheless "deemed important."

Although I believe (and will argue later) that the broader Christian religion displays several carnivalesque traits, I will be using the following section to address my own particular approach to Christianity. The subtitle "A Carnival Christianity" then, refers to both positions in different ways, for when I investigated closely, I realised that both "forms" of Christianity, to differing degrees, bear links to the carnival, and therefore contribute to those carnivalesque elements of my life that form the subject of this investigation.



(Fig. 82)

In his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco introduces us to the character of the blind Benedictine monk (and chief librarian) Jorge of Burgos, who is convinced that laughter is a sin for which is reserved the highest judgment. He is so committed to preserving what he perceives to be the right – read sombre – approach to God and religion, that he poisons the pages of Aristotle’s treatise on comedy, ensuring the silence of any readers who come across the (supposedly lost) work. In the novel’s denouement, Jorge’s crimes are uncovered, but rather than relinquish the treatise, Jorge eats the poisoned pages himself, ending his own life. When Franciscan monk, William of Baskerville, confronts Jorge about his crimes, questioning the rationale behind his fear and abhorrence of laughter as well as his decision to go to such extreme lengths to protect the treatise, Jorge responds thus:

That laughter is proper to man is a sign of our limitation, sinners that we are. . . . Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the vellein from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God. This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for canceling fear (Eco 2014, 508).

Jorge’s hostility towards humour is such that killing people seemed a less grievous offence towards God than admitting humour’s place in religion, Eco no doubt satirising a commonly held (and in many cases justified) perception of Christians as humourless. Interestingly, Jorge’s surmised that humour has the ability to dispel fear channels the carnivalesque notion that laughter frees us from enslavement to “official” and “cosmic” fear. As Bakhtin notes: “Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically”

(1994a, 23). I use this example from *The Name of the Rose* as an exemplar of a certain approach to Christianity that is thus antithetical to the carnival.²¹ Jorge's murderous mission is the result of his view that the gap between the sacred and the profane should be maintained at all cost. In the following examples from both pop culture and my own life, we see that gap bridged.

COLBERT'S CARNIVAL

In his show, *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert's persona is a caricatured version of certain right-wing political commentators. While the show's satirising of those on the more conservative end of the spectrum evidences his liberal leanings, he is also a practicing Roman Catholic who is quite vocal about his religious beliefs. In a 2006 televised interview with Richard Dawkins (Kubbesi 2011), Colbert infuses a serious discussion about the existence of God with self-deprecating humour that ostensibly undermines his position. Channelling the grotesque, Colbert's comedic approach is both bawdy and ambivalent – the kind generally not equated with religion. At the outset of the interview, Dawkins comments that people often confuse him with Stephen Hawking. Colbert then asks Dawkins whether he (like Hawking) is going to Hell. Dawkins says "I reckon so," to which Colbert replies: "Yeah, God doesn't like black holes," pausing dramatically, waiting for the penny to drop while feigning regret at the joke's controversial and sexually explicit nature.

While ostensibly undermining his own position, here Colbert challenges the misperception at one time popular within certain Christian (and secular!) circles that the white race was superior to others. In the case of such "Christians," however, this hierarchy was presumably sanctioned by God. Here he provokes ambivalent laughter, the kind which brings himself and his religion into question through negative association. Colbert's opening line is: "My guest tonight is a scientist who argues that there is no God. Well, you know what, he'll have an eternity in Hell to prove it." Again, an ambivalent laughter is produced, Colbert evoking the bigotry and intolerance of professedly Christian sects such as the Westboro Baptist Church, whose claim to be Christians is arguably undermined by their picketing of the funerals of deceased servicemen with signs such as "Thank God for 9/11," "God Hates Fags," and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" (Dailey 2014).

Colbert is clearly knowledgeable, has written numerous bestselling books, been invited to perform at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner and named one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in 2006 and 2012 (Benacka 2017, 30). His humour is buttressed by a keen

²¹ The views of Eco's fanatical librarian are not necessarily representative of the church, either. Rather, Jorge embodies the kind of humourless, oppressive aspects of religion which Bakhtin similarly critiques throughout *Rabelais*.

intelligence (apparent in many of his other interviews), so his deliberately naïve arguments for God throughout the majority of the interview are clearly undermined by our awareness of his formidable intellect. Later he contributes to Dawkins' discussion on the misperceptions surrounding Darwinism by referencing a Pachinko (pinball) machine, quipping: "Well it's too complex for us to perceive, y'know? It's like, I know a Pachinko machine isn't an accident either – there's a reason why it bounces from nail to nail." Dawkins attempts to move on, but Colbert interrupts him, saying: "I want you to address my Pachinko analogy." Then, after fumbling through a reiteration of Dawkins' position, Colbert holds his head in his hands and says: "I'm lost, I'm lost, it hurts when I think about it. See, if I just think that God just (*smacking his hands together*) did it, *that* I can understand."

His feigned naïveté here brings to mind overly simplistic arguments espoused by some Christians (one is reminded of the much-parodied YouTube video wherein a man suggests that proof of God's existence might be found by looking at the way a banana – "dubbed the atheist's nightmare" – fits neatly into the human hand and is easily openable/consumable) (superic 2006).²² Finally, Colbert states: "95% of Americans believe that there is a God, ok, so doesn't that disprove your argument? Or else you don't believe in democracy?" When Dawkins attempts to respond, Colbert interjects with "I'd say the people have spoken." Here, he deliberately commits the fallacy of equating popular opinion with actuality. Obviously, the fact that large numbers of people have at some stage subscribed to erroneous beliefs (that the world is flat, that the sun revolves around the earth, for example), does not make those beliefs any less erroneous, as Colbert well knows.

I believe that this example from pop culture demonstrates several of the characteristics of a Carnavalesque Christianity. Some of the most insightful critiques of Christianity, I argue, are orchestrated by Christians themselves, having realised their hypocrisy, or failure to live out the ideals of their faith. A Christianity which makes itself susceptible to humorous critique thus mingles the sacred with the profane, embracing what Bakhtin describes as the "crucible of laughter" (1984, 121) and its ability to expose both our own individual failures and the inevitable failures of the broader church.

BIBLEGATE

I'm running out of Reading Cinemas dragging behind me a gigantic inflatable man – the hallway display for an upcoming Harry Potter movie. I don't even like Harry Potter. What I do like is the thought of Perth's biggest balloon floating above my house to direct people towards the party of the year,

²² Conveniently, he forgets to mention the pineapple (or what I like to call "the creationist's nightmare").

namely my 21st (in hindsight, an address would have sufficed). In the car park, my sister is waiting, engine idling, in what would later be referred to by police as the “getaway vehicle.”

For the record, I’d never stolen anything in my life. I was the straightest kid you could find. On a trip to the beach with friends in grade 11, I was the only one who tried to convince everybody not to take a drink gratis from the shops. Eventually I succumbed to peer pressure, but the toll on my conscience was too much, and the next day I caught the bus into town so that I could repay the owners. I didn’t have the guts to admit that I’d stolen something, so instead I simply slid the required amount across the counter while no one was watching. For all I knew, it was picked up by a customer or pocketed by the cashier, but either way I was fine. There was no more blood on my hands.

In my mind, I still haven’t really “stolen” something (despite evidence to the contrary). I thought of it as a kind of loose borrowing, the taking of something inconsequential – like plucking lemons from the overhanging branches of a neighbour’s tree. I assumed that they would have multiple props for each movie that were similar to the one I took – that they would simply go into the storeroom, grab another one and move it to its allocated spot, shaking their heads and muttering under their breath, “those rascals.” Apparently, this is not the case: they are given a limited amount, and any extra ones that they have to purchase are worth hundreds of dollars.

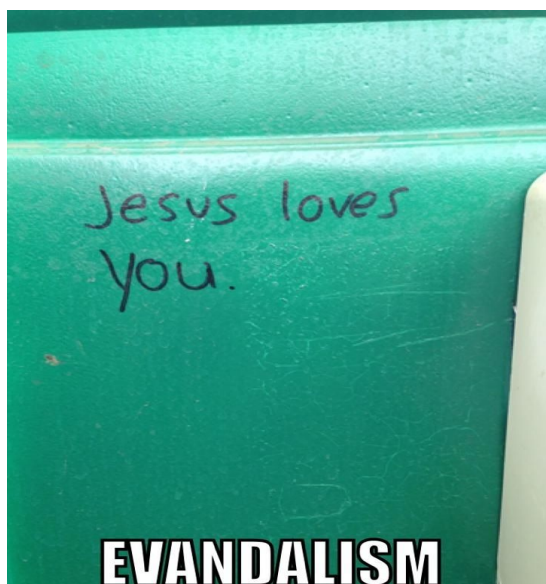
The escape plan for extricating myself and my semi-stolen goods was not elaborate or premeditated. Had it been so, I might have got away with it. Instead, I ran out through the foyer with my newly acquired goods, struggling to carry the rotund inflatable figure while trying to pull up my jeans at the back, which were too loose and had started to fall down (because even more criminal than being a thief is publicly displaying a good few centimetres of butt crack). It was soon apparent that it couldn’t be stuffed into the car, so I yelled breathy instructions to my sister to meet me around the corner while I left her holding on to one of the figurine’s arms. I ran off while she drove away, door open, grasping one of the balloon man’s hands and trying to steer at the same time. To this day, I don’t know whether anyone was even chasing me. What I do know is that someone thought, “I’ll get the licence plate number of those two idiots. And then I’ll ring the police.”

That same night, I went out to dinner with a friend while my mum held bible study at our house. Halfway through a discussion which I like to imagine was on the importance of the seventh commandment, she was interrupted by a knock at the door – two sombre-looking policemen wished to enquire about the whereabouts of the “stolen goods.” Telling everybody to continue on as they were, she escorted the cops through to my bedroom where a very conspicuous, slightly deflated fat man took up the majority of my small bedroom. Needless to say, it was an awkward situation for my mum, and

she decided that the best thing to do after the cops left was to continue on as if nothing had happened. "Would anyone like a cup of tea?" she said to a table full of confused faces, and silently cursed me. (To her credit, it wasn't long before she saw the humour in the situation, and the story has gone on to take its rightful place amongst the collection of Green family favourites.) The repercussions of our brief foray into a life of crime saw my sister (hilariously labelled an "accomplice") and I having to go to the police station where we were questioned and where my sister broke down, sobbing, because it was suggested that she might never be allowed to teach again. According to the police officers, we narrowly escaped a criminal record, which was a bit of a shame, really, because it would have boosted my waning street cred.

Thinking that was the end of the debacle, I continued to make plans for my 21st, which had now been cruelly robbed of a gigantic floating figurine above the roof. Unbeknownst to me, however, my brother, who thought that I needed to be taken down a peg or two (I had teased my sister mercilessly about my relative composure under investigation), rang a radio station that did prank calls and organised for them to ring me posing as officers from the same police station. Another lot of blow-up figurines had been stolen from a nearby cinema, they said, and since I seemed to be in the habit of stealing things, especially of an inflatable nature, I was the chief suspect. I would be required to be at the police station on the night of my birthday (my brother had provided them with the date) in order for them to interrogate me. The phone call ended with me crying and saying that I couldn't possibly be there on that date because I was hosting a very important party. In hindsight, I really should have been able to see that it was all a joke, but I was completely fooled, and in an ironic full-circle, the radio station said that since I seemed to be so fond of inflatable things, they would provide a gigantic bouncy castle for my party.

Crime really does pay.



(Fig. 83)

At first glance, this appears to be merely a humorous story comparable to my collection of drivers' licences, or any of the other pranks outlined in this thesis. On reflection, however, I found that it contained similar relevance to my investigation into the carnivalesque and its manifestation in my life. Not only is the act itself carnivalesque (invoking the trickstar and the regenerative, grotesque intermingling of the sacred and the profane), but my response to the outcome of that act also. In fact, it is my *response* that constitutes the strongest link between this story and my claims to exercise a Carnival Christianity.

Let us first establish the "sacred" and "profane" elements in this scenario. The sacred finds its symbolic counterpart in the image of a Bible study being held at my mum's house. Not only does attendance at, or hosting of, a Bible study imply a correlative attendance at church, thus strengthening connections with the sacred, it also might conventionally be interpreted as signifying a degree of piety or devotion that goes beyond mere weekly attendance at church.²³ Furthermore, my mum was not only hosting, but *leading* Bible study. One finds oneself firmly in the domain of the "sacred." Into this "sacred" tableau comes an intrusion of the "profane" in the form of two police officers searching for stolen goods. It is an intrusion that, rather than being met with horror (albeit some of that was felt initially), is eventually met with laughter. Importantly, the laughter that results is not only *despite* the rather ignominious fact that my criminal undertakings were exposed during Bible study, but *because* of that same fact. Bakhtin notes of laughter that it

²³ For the record, mum doesn't think she gets extra heavenly brownie points for her efforts.

has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it (1994a, 23).

Laughter is operating in a similar manner in this story, I believe, as two radically incongruous spheres (the sacred and the profane) come into “crude contact.” As a result of this juxtaposition, any presumptions that I may have had about myself being, for example, a “morally upright” or “virtuous” person are humorously overturned and undermined. The “external shell” of religiosity, after all, cannot remain intact under the scrutiny of festive, medieval laughter which, Bakhtin posits, “resisted praise, flattery, hypocrisy” (1984, 92).

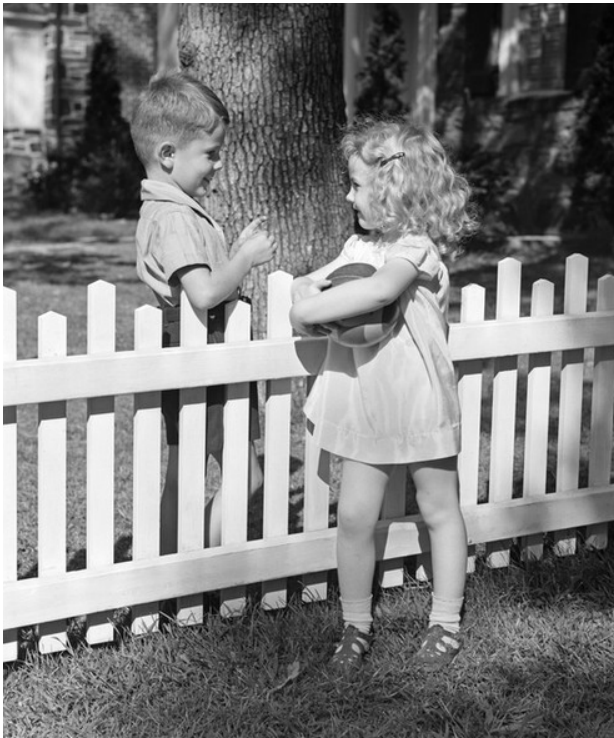
In *Divine Folly*, Doris Donnelly notes of the Christian faith that there is a temptation to “become weighted with gravity, to deal with prayer and worship with excessive formality, and to take ourselves very seriously indeed” (1992, 393). Not only does this describe Eco’s Jorge, but – as my journal entries will attest – it has sometimes described various aspects of my own faith. Donnelly’s insistence that the “opposite route is the direct one,” however, is grounded in her idea that “a sense of humour, like a true sense of humility involves ruthless honesty about who we are, without disguise or pretense” (1992, 393). In *Redeeming Laughter*, sociologist Peter Berger similarly discusses the transcendental properties of the comic perspective noting the way in which “the sense of humour repeatedly perceives the built-in incongruence of being human” (2014, 243). Like Donnelly, he points to the interrelationship between humour and humility (albeit inferentially) stating: “All human pretensions to wisdom and power are comically debunked as this fundamental incongruence is perceived” (2014, 243).

The crucial difference between myself and Jorge’s approach to Christianity – as I believe this story illustrates – is that while I am also capable of taking myself too seriously, of striving towards an ultimately illusory perfection and stability, my life is nonetheless punctuated by the spirit of the carnival, and the understanding that grotesque laughter regenerates as much as it degrades. As Belden C. Lane notes in *Grace and the Grotesque*: “The art of the grotesque—in literature and in life—can suggest to those who embrace it a healing spirituality of brokenness. It elicits both disgust and delight and opens up disconcerting but imaginative possibilities for belief” (1990, 1067). This “spirituality of brokenness” which Lane weds with the grotesque bears a striking resemblance, I believe, to the Christian gospel disseminated by Jesus Christ, a gospel which invokes the upside-down, inside-out, role-reversing world of carnival. Crucially, as we will see, it is the ostensibly “moral” or “religious” Pharisees who warrant Jesus’ most scathing critique; individuals who, like Jorge, exhibit a decidedly

“extra-carnival” approach to life. In the following section I expand on these reflections from my own life by exploring the links between carnival and the broader Christian faith.²⁴

²⁴ My investigation here of the links between Christianity and carnival is not exhaustive. Nor was it intended to be. Rather, I seek to outline some of what I perceive to be the chief connections between Jesus Christ, the Christian gospel and the carnivalesque. Doing so, I believe, further bolsters the autoethnographic (and thus central) component of this chapter.

Love Thy Neighbour.



(Fig. 84)

I was revisiting Robert Frost's poem, *Mending Wall* the other day, and though I'd always thought of that guy, the one that's lumbering around his yard screening out his neighbour stone by stone, as a hard-boiled misanthropist who probably lived with his mum well into his forties, I can kind of see his point now, get the gist of his repeated refrain: *Good fences make good neighbours*.

I thought that once I bought my own place, my lingering aversion to neighbours would disappear, or at least decrease somewhat. I remain, however, unmoved. As much as I desperately want to be that amiable individual who, moments after unpacking their bags, delivers freshly-baked cookies next door, promising to tend to the inhabitants' garden and ghastly Rottweiler should they ever go on holidays, I have no desire to encourage feelings of mateship. Not with the neighbours on either side of me. Not with the neighbours opposite me, diagonal to me, or literally anywhere else on the street. I put it down to the fact that my past is littered with a string of bad neighbours, all of whom proved to be unsuitable candidates for friends, let alone casual acquaintances. While the folk on Ramsay street might happily wander through each other's houses helping themselves to sugar, eggs and (as has been the case in several *Neighbour* episodes) other people's husbands, I was content to have as little interaction as possible with these individuals who, through nothing more than a random chain of events, had wound up living next door to me. Not all of them were bad *per se*. The first neighbours I remember were lovely; a young twenty-something couple who moved in when I was in primary school. Smart,

sophisticated and exceedingly hip, they were the kind of people I imagined myself to be in ten years time. I also observed, with the eye of a seasoned horticulturist, several favourable changes they had made to the former owner's backyard. Various shrubs and flowers covered what had previously been a vast expanse of dirt leading from the back door of their house up to our fence.

"Is that something from the *Sterculiaceae* family, dad?" I said one day, directing his attention towards one of several plants in their garden, all gloriously green despite a sweltering summer. I had just started learning the scientific names of a range of Australian flora, and though most of my knowledge was confined to your usual suspects, *Eucalyptus* something or other, *Acacia* this or that, the addition of the *Sterculia* marked my venture into more exotic territory.

According to some article I'd recently read in a doctor's surgery waiting room, my brain would only be able to soak up data swiftly, and in large quantities, until the age of 16. I was horrified – *how had I not learnt of this earlier?* It was inconceivable that my source should be a year-old edition of Woman's Day and not one of my parents or teachers. This, after all, was crucial information. As far as I saw it, by the time I reached my parent's age, my brain would resemble less a sponge than it would a crusty old pile of cellulose fibres, incapable of retaining any new material whatsoever.

Spurred on by this horrendous image, I devoted myself to learning. There was no Google back in the 90s, so knowledge was gleaned from my dad, an avid gardener and floraphile. I would pester him for names and variations while he was mowing the lawn or pruning the fig trees, trees whose purple-veined, frankly terrifying fruit my sisters and I would later have to collect in plastic bags before they decomposed, turning to jam in the grass. When my dad cut them down years later, we saw not the death of a delicious source of fruit, but the elimination of one of the ickier chores from our weekly to-do list.

I thrived on disseminating my newfound knowledge whenever, and wherever, the opportunity arose. "Oh that," I'd say to friends, as they pointed to one of any number of plants. "That's an *Acacia Fasciculifera*, or what *you*," I said, turning my attention to the dimmest-looking member of the group, "might call a wattle." Wattle was broken into two distinct syllables. *Wat-tle*. I was unsure that these simple folk, who had not even a rudimentary understanding of plants, let alone Latin, would be able to keep up with me. If the scientific names ever eluded me, I used the plant's regular title and attached to it the name of a dinosaur, or a Greek-sounding surname. Rose for example might become *Rosus Papadopoulos*, the gerbera *Gerberatus Diplodochus*. They smelt a rat one day when I called a hibiscus a *Hibiscus Tyrannosaurus-Rexus* and I swiftly lost my status as the smartest kid in Year 7. The baton was picked up by a guy called Simon who knew how to recount the 12 times table in ten seconds flat.

The diagnosis of my hip neighbours' plant, it turned out, was way off the mark. This plant, unlike any from the *Sterculiaceae* family, sported a different shade of green, and broke off into leafy, ragged

fingers. It was, as I would later find out from my parents, *Sweet Mary Janeus Illegalatus*. I was so taken aback that we were living next door to hardened criminals that I would give my mum strict instructions whenever I left the house. A trip to the letterbox was logged. "If I'm not back within the minute," I'd say, taking one last, lingering look at her face, "please contact the authorities immediately."

Not long after my horrific discovery, the couple moved. Maida Vale, it turned out, must have been less of a pot hot spot than they had envisaged. This was surprising to me – I had imagined that the local high school alone would have kept them afloat. Hell, some of the pre-schoolers looked like users. In hindsight, though, the average Maida Valean was probably chasing a little more bang for their buck, something that started with "m" and rhymed with "eth." Whatever the case, I was sad to see them go. Sure, they were dangerous, but they seemed like genuinely good people. If only, I thought, they'd taken a moment to speak to me, I could have shown them the error of their ways, talked them through a ten-step programme in which they moved from social delinquent to thriving member of the local community. "This is you now," I'd say, pointing to a sketch of two people holding guns and bleeding from various points on their body, "and this is you if you follow my advice." They would be effusive with their praise, swearing off drugs for life. I would smile, knowingly, as though I'd seen it all before, as though they were the last in a long line of people whose lives I had pulled from the gutter.

A young family moved in after them. They had a Jack Russell and one insufferable, precocious child, a Shirley Temple lookalike who spoke with a lisp and an American accent she had inherited from daytime television. She was the kind of kid you might see on Oprah, chosen because of some odd, but wholly unremarkable, gift – an unusual birthmark, perhaps, or the ability to name obscure capital cities on request. *Benin?* my pint-sized neighbour would say, tapping her index finger against her nose and squinting into the camera. Then, after a tension-filled few seconds, she'd jump from the couch, exclaiming: *Why, ith Porto-Novo, of courth – when you gonna athk me the hard oneth?!!!* The entire studio audience would dissolve into laughter. The only member of the family I could identify with was the Jack Russell who, to his credit, was always running away.

That kind of kid, naturally, had no respect for age-related hierarchies, and even though I was at least six years her senior, she insisted on addressing me by my first name, rather than, say, Miss Green, or ma'am. And she was always there. Always. A stool was installed just by the fence, and if she stood on her tippy toes, it allowed her full scope of the left side of our house. Given her supersonic hearing – she could hear a pin drop at 50 yards – any outdoor venture was suddenly fraught with danger. I wanted the junkies back.

"What are you doing?" she'd say as you dashed out to grab something off the clothesline, whistling merrily through a bus-sized gap in her front teeth. If you were running late in the morning, she might move her stool to the other side of the fence, issuing a cheery admonition to your retreating figure.

"Shouldn't you hurry up?" she'd shout, "you're going to be late for thcoooooo!"

Her parents pulled off the remarkable feat of being even more obnoxious than their daughter. The mum was into belly dancing, and while that's all well and good as a dirty secret one only discloses after too many Bacardi Breezers, I once had the misfortune of witnessing an impromptu demonstration, accompanied by a concomitant dialogue on the virtues of gyrating one's hips and upper body. "It's very good for toning," she said as she writhed around our living room, arms flailing, legs akimbo. "You can really feel the burn."

While the dad didn't have similarly questionable hobbies, he had perfected the art of turning any conversation into a legislative debate. The guy could politicise a light bulb. Luckily, I was spared his diatribes most of my childhood, but as soon as I graduated high school, I became an unwilling sounding board to some of his more, let's say, *outré* ideas. When I told him one year that I hadn't placed a vote in the federal election, he shook his head in disbelief. "It's that kind of attitude," he said, trailing off temporarily, derailed by the horrifying nature of my crime. "It's that kind of attitude," he continued, gazing off into the distance, "that led to the Holocaust." I struggled to see how my apathy could possibly birth the Fuhrer, let alone the slaughter of six million Jews, but I had no desire to prolong the dialogue. Engaging with a madman, as I have learned, rarely yields fruit.

The people on our other side weren't much better. Being a rental property (and not a particularly upmarket one at that), it attracted all kinds of undesirable tenants. The term "house proud" would never, even by an immense stretch of the imagination, be ascribed to any of its various, ephemeral inhabitants, each of them lasting only several months before they moved on, presumably to rehab or a maximum-security prison. Grass grew nearly as tall as the fence, and when it was mown, it was stripped back to dirt, so as to delay the inevitable.

Perhaps its worst tenants, though, were a middle-aged couple who brought with them a fleet of beat up cars, none of them roadworthy. While presumably do-ups, I never saw either of the owners attempting to fix them, and they ended up becoming less a potential means of transportation than hokey installation art, the sort bought by rich collectors intent on diversifying their collection. Apparently of noble stock, public transport was out of the question for this family, and so my mum became a kind of ersatz Uber driver, shuttling them to doctor's appointments, soccer training, birthdays. Towards the end, though, they started pushing their luck. Mom officially abandoned her imagined reprisal of *Driving Miss Daisy* when they rang her up on New Year's Eve at 3am to say that they needed a ride home. "We, *hiccup*, need you to give us a ride home, *belch*. We're too tanked to drive." It was the final straw.

Finally, and perhaps most memorably, there was the lady across the road who shared with the ancient Egyptians a near-psychotic devotion to cats. Her entire life, I fathomed, had been devoted to

her beloved Himalayan, an animal so ugly Noah would have denied it passage, and who she claimed could dial Chicken Treat. It's worth repeating. She claimed that her cat could, and *did* call, Chicken Treat whenever he felt like chicken. And a treat. That was one liberated feline. What annoyed me most about this woman was that she, and those of her ilk, were personally responsible for the term "cat lady." I hated dogs, and it pained me that if – *mon Dieu* – I chose to remain single and childless, I would have to forego owning a cat for the sake of my reputation. It's a misconception that continues to irk me, the notion that dog lovers are active, attractive and outgoing, and that, conversely, cat lovers sit at home in a pool of their own urine, knitting countless doilies and growing their own whiskers. Cats don't smell or bark, they rarely hump your leg and most crucially, they're not needy. It's creepy enough when people are clingy, let alone animals.

I once ended up inside her house – for what reason I can't quite remember. Perhaps to take over freshly-baked cookies, or retrieve a stray ball. Whatever the case, I was anxious to make the encounter as brief as possible. I would not go the way of my mum, I thought, who had once been cornered in our kitchen for two hours by this woman. When our cat-loving neighbour finally answered, she was bleary-eyed, agitated, no doubt woken from a mid-afternoon nap. Nonetheless, she invited me through to the kitchen for a drink on the condition that I not track in any dirt behind me, or speak too loudly. Loud noises, she claimed, upset her delicate senses, and could precipitate a nervous breakdown, or worse. *Or worse?* I thought. *It could get worse than this?*

I had seen enough in my brief stay to know that the neighbourhood rumours of her having killed her husband and stashed his body in a spare closet somewhere were probably unfounded. "She may look crazy," I'd say, after my reconnaissance mission, "but I doubt she's actually knocked anyone off." The lesser claim, however – of her being mentally unhinged – was evidenced elsewhere, in her alarming choice of interior decoration, for example.

If she was trying to lose the cat lady moniker, I thought, surveying her collection of porcelain cat figurines – cats dancing, cats playing the piano, cats doing gymnastics – she was going about it all wrong. And every surface of her lounge room, I noticed, seemed to be covered in plastic – from the hall runner, which extended the length of the lounge room floor up until the kitchen, through to the armchairs, whose floral print was petrified under a layer of thick, dirt-resilient film. There was even a plastic cover on the remote. *How unclean could hands possibly be?* I thought. *A bum, your feet – those were dirty parts of your body, but not your frigging hands.*

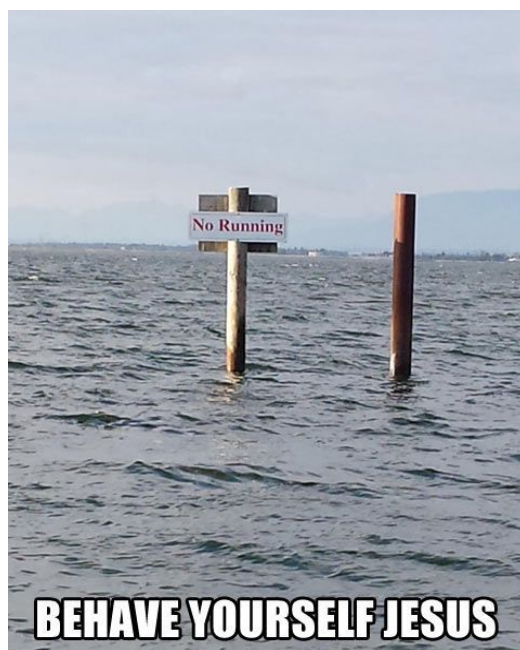
On the way out, crunching my way back across the plastic runner, I stopped to pat her cat, who was lazily splayed on a table near the door. He looked at me plaintively, his hideous face imploring me to take him with me, somewhere with surfaces he could dig his claws into. *Meeow*, he purred, and I knew that he was trying to communicate to me, in the only language he knew, that his owner was

batshit crazy. "Good possum," my neighbour said, bending down and rubbing her nose against his. "You love your mummy *ever*so much, don't you?"

Mine, as you can see, was not a past that would inspire me to love my neighbours, regardless of the biblical exhortations. Jesus, I figured, had never lived on *our*street. Nevertheless, I've tried to make more of an effort now that I have my own place. And my neighbours here aren't that bad, in all honesty. It's just that I have no desire to start a relationship with someone purely because they're in close proximity to me. It's as illogical as dating the postman because I see him every day, or the checkout guy at Coles. Or, for that matter, my psychologist. At least with the psychologist I'd be saving money – with mate's rates, it might only cost \$100 to be told I'm unhinged.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, says Frost. Maybe so, but it sure as hell ain't me.

DID CHRIST EVER LOL?



(Fig. 85)

There is no doubt that the Bible is rarely thought of as a humorous text. Morreall states: “If the Scriptures are God’s revelation of himself and his will for human beings, humor has no place in God or in his plan for human beings” (2001, 301). In the nineteenth century, articulating similar views, Baudelaire quipped that it was “not without cause” that the Bible had “been called the world’s least amusing book, a sober-minded tome whose black covers convey its essential mood and vision” (as quoted in Al-Ameedi and Abdulmajeed, 2016, 74). If these observations are indeed true, any further attempts at connecting carnival and Christianity are futile considering that, as we have seen, carnival is “organized on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin 1984, 8). I propose, however, that Morreall and Baudelaire (amongst others) fail to recognise the subtler forms of humour occurring in the gospels, as well as Jesus’ ministry; humour that frequently incorporates irony, paradox, hyperbole and satire.²⁵ Perception of biblical humour, as Hershey Friedman has noted, can often be clouded by preconceptions (2002, 217) or the adoption of what Willie van Heerden terms a “*narrow* view of humour,” one example of which is “the notion that [humour] is the opposite of sadness, or a responsible attitude, or seriousness” (2001, 76).

Certainly, there is no passage in the Bible which makes explicit mention of Jesus laughing, however, as Hans Geybels notes, in no place does it state that he *didn’t* either. Rather, Geybels suggests that

²⁵ Importantly, I am not claiming here that the Bible in its entirety is a humorous text. The enormity – and perhaps futility – of that task is beyond the purview of a section which must necessarily confine itself to examining the humour of *Christ-ianity*.

certain passages “imply a laughing Jesus” (2011, 16). Furthermore, Jesus often refers to the related concept of joy. In John 15:11, for example, Jesus states: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”²⁶ Similarly, in John 17:13, Jesus states: “I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.” As Michael Patella notes: “While the New Testament does not depict much in terms of laughter, joy stands out as one of its principal characteristics” (2015, 167).

Geybels notes that the tendency for Christians to focus on God’s word in its strictly liturgical form has often been to the detriment of appreciating the potential humour in the Bible, noting that “Jesus’ subtle humour – his irony – will generally escape the attention of the average believer” (2011, 15). To illustrate this irony, he points to John 8, wherein the Pharisees bring before Jesus a woman caught in adultery, questioning him as to whether she should be stoned in accordance with the Mosaic law. Jesus’ well-known reply to the group is that the individual amongst them “without sin” should “cast the first stone,” a suggestion which, ultimately, results in the woman’s emancipation. As Geybels notes, there is a definite sense of irony in his subsequent dealings with the woman: “[Jesus] hardly gives her time to gather her wits about her. He asks: ‘Woman, where are they?’ What could she answer to that? Laconically He adds: ‘Has no one condemned you?’” (2011, 15).

Here, there is a kind of dry humour at play, one that undergirds the more serious aspect of Jesus’ message. As Geybels notes: “Humour is a key concept in the actions of Jesus. It is his way to put the restrictive culture He grew up in, in perspective. It is the ideal method of delivering his message without moralising” (2011, 16). Certainly, there is a serious point to be made, as evidenced by Jesus’ injunction to the woman immediately after the event that she “leave [her] life of sin” (John 8:11), but the point is made through a gentle kind of humour. Not only does he explicitly state that she is free from his personal judgment, “then neither do I condemn you” (John 8:11), but his actions imply that despite her ostensibly “immoral” state, she is on equal footing with those supposedly upright citizens calling for her execution. An analogous instance of such irony (and hyperbole) is found in Matthew 7:3, wherein Jesus condemns the vice of hypocrisy in the following manner: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” As John J. Slovickovski notes, Jesus’ “moral injunction” here functions through an irony that highlights “the difference between appearance and reality” (2013, 249). It is a serious message delivered with a wry smile.

²⁶ All biblical quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

Conrad Hyers has also stressed the frequency of Jesus' utilisation of comedic means to deflate self-importance, noting:

His descriptions of the hypocrisies of the Pharisees use overtly humorous images: the blind leading the blind; straining out a gnat, then swallowing a camel; meticulously cleaning the outside of a cup while leaving the inside filthy; maintaining white-washed tombs that are outwardly beautiful but inwardly full of dead bones; loudly honoring past prophets while plotting to kill present ones who preach the same message" (1987, 6-7).

Lastly, Jesus' demeanour and actions themselves shatter the image of a sober, serious, Jesus who neither employed nor enjoyed humour. In *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, Hyers notes that Jesus "began his ministry by turning water into wine at the marriage festivities in Cana and was accused of being 'a glutton and a drunkard' and associating with 'publicans and sinners'" (2003, 16). This image, notes Hyers, "reveals a side of Jesus which the pious imagination has tended to ignore or deny" (2003, 16).

I have provided here several instances of Jesus' employment of hyperbole, paradox, irony and satire. Numerous others exist.²⁷ In the remainder of this chapter, the focus moves away from Jesus' specific usage of humour towards the broader humorous and carnivalesque implications of his person and ministry. The Jesus presented in the Gospels, for example, is not beneath washing his disciples' feet or mingling with the societal outcasts of his day (such as lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes). Here we see shades of the comedian as envisaged by Hyers, an individual "who moves within the dustiness and density of the real world, unafraid to get hands dirty and feet muddy, without anxiety over losing face or tarnishing some polished image" (1982, 23). Furthermore, acts such as The Incarnation, for example, display what Gerald A. Arbuckle describes in his book *Laughing With God* as "divine humor," by which he means that God's actions are found humorous because of their deviation from our assumptions about how God should interact with us. Arbuckle states: "We expect God to distance himself from sinful creatures but, incongruously, God does not. Through Christ, God becomes one with us" (2008, 20).

TOTALLY GROTESQUE: JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

In *The Grotesque Cross*, Hephzibah Darshni Dutt details the agonising process of crucifixion in the following manner: "It involved flayed skin, tortured breathing, the smells of dried blood, sweat and urine, insects landing on open sores, gored open flesh, and groans of agony from a broken body"

²⁷ For hyperbole, see Matt. 5: 38-42. For paradox, see Mark 12: 41-44. For irony, see Luke 15: 11-32. For satire, see Luke 10: 25-37.

(2015, 7-8). Dutt, however, sees in the crucifixion not only the degenerative but the *regenerative* properties of what he terms a “performative grotesque,” stating: “For a believing audience, and in context of the entirety of the biblical story, enfolded in this horrific persecution scenario is the fulfillment of a promise of redemption and reunion between God and humankind” (2015, 8). Dutt also references the work of Geoffrey Harpham for whom, he claims, the grotesque “occurs not just in practices and conventions but can also be described in terms of the emotions it evokes: laughter, horror, fear, astonishment, and disgust” (2015, 7). Such contradictory emotions are evoked by the image of a crucified Jesus. In this instance, for example, the fear and disgust aroused by the crucifixion is rendered ambivalent when juxtaposed against a future redemptive hope.

The crucifixion also involves a striking intermingling of the sacred and the profane. As Andrei S. P. Brennan notes: “In the culture of the ancient world, crucifixion was the lowest form of execution, reserved for the worst sort of criminals” (2002, 94). Jesus’ death by crucifixion, therefore, represents the utter debasing of the sacred considering his alleged status as God incarnate. As Andrew Tatusko notes, the crucifixion is “a profoundly grotesque event.” He states: “In the biblical account of the crucifixion in Mark, the grotesque body of Christ and the holiness of God are blurred in the cry of dereliction which is an echo of Psalm 22:2, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’” (2005, par. 31). The crucifixion, thus, unites both the sacred and the profane as well as displaying that ambivalence which Bakhtin considers an “indispensable trait” of the grotesque image (1984, 24).

As Ralf Remshardt states: “Bakhtin’s carnival body is death-less because for him all decay is only the prelude to renewal” (2016, 48). By virtue of the gospel account of his death and subsequent resurrection, Jesus becomes the reification of this concept, recalling Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque image as “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (1984, 25). The grotesque element is further intensified by the fact that this rebirth moves outwards, extending to all humanity, embodying Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism as “presented not in a private egotistic form . . . but as something universal, representing all the people” (1984, 19). Discussing the imagery connected with the “real grotesque,” Bakhtin notes that there are “simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born” (1984, 52). Through Jesus’ crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, there is a rebirth not only in a spiritual sense²⁸ but in a literal sense also, in the future hope of an afterlife.

²⁸ “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Furthermore, the *physical* aspect of Jesus' resurrection is stressed in the Gospels. According to Timothy Keller, this resurrection in bodily form gains its extraordinary significance from the fact that, in the Greco-Roman worldview of that time, no God would ever retain a body:

To them the physical, by definition, was always falling apart and therefore salvation was conceived as *liberation* from the body. In this worldview resurrection was not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul, having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back... The goal was to get free of the body forever (2008, 206-207).

Interestingly, this reflects the Renaissance view of the body that we have previously seen expressed in *Rabelais*, a view which is anathema to the carnival grotesque and its emphatic embrace of the physical, communal, anti-canonical body. As Wilson Yates notes: "For Bakhtin, what have been made 'private' and 'degraded' are to be accepted and celebrated. Until they are, we have a body set over against itself, a body-spirit dualism in which the body is made inferior, an alienated body that denies the unity and wholeness essential to its true nature" (1997, 24). By virtue of Jesus' resurrection in bodily form, then, there is a radical affirmation of the body that aligns itself with the carnival spirit.

In the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we clearly glimpse the intermingling of the sacred and the profane, the cycle of death and rebirth and an embrace of the physical body – all qualities which characterise the ambivalent and communal aspect of the carnival grotesque. Furthermore, I believe that the gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion and subsequent resurrection resembles what Bakhtin describes as an "act of carnival laughter" inasmuch as it defies finality or closure, enacting, instead, the coalescing of "death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter)" (Bakhtin 1994b, 127).²⁹

²⁹ Consider, for example, the apostle Paul's exultant musings on the ramifications of Christ's crucifixion: "'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" (1 Cor. 15: 54-55).

Sew what.



(Fig. 86) *Legit my cross-stitch.*

The postmodern age has gifted us with many things: cultural relativism, magic realism and, more importantly, five glorious seasons of *Breaking Bad*. But the true unsung hero of this era (at least in my mind) is irony; that clear, unequivocal message that says *how cool is it that I'm this pathetic?!!!!* For the benefit of younger readers, the concept of irony was invented in the Netherlands in 1652 after a particularly rowdy game of Sjoelen (source pending). More importantly, however, it was *reinvented* in 1996 by singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette, whose hit track *Ironic* failed to list any instances of actual irony, thus making the song unintentionally ironic. Morissette was either a genius without equal or a lazy songwriter, but either way she had put irony back on the map.

Irony in its current, near-aggressive iteration, has done wonders for those of us with a penchant for daggy pastimes, pastimes which we once hid from our friends, our family, and in the most pronounced cases, ourselves. We spoke in hushed tones of our predilections, hoping that terms like "ecru" and "14-count Aida" would be obscure to enough to elude detection or, even better, be mistakenly linked with "cooler" hobbies, such as flamethrowing or white-water rafting. "Waste canvas?" I'd reply, if pressed: "It's the stuff I use to clean my jet ski."

It's a wonder I had any friends at all, really, in the pre-irony 90s. Back then I had no excuse for my behaviour. While other prepubescents might spend the hazy hours between the final school bell and

the first summons to dinner doing normal, social things – riding bikes with school friends, or hanging out at the park with a guy they'd been seeing seriously since recess, I would return home immediately, shower, slip into a fresh pair of pyjamas and settle down to a few hours of needlework.

What I liked about cross-stitch was its rhythm, its exactitude, its twelve stitches across and twelve stitches back. In no other aspect of my day-to-day life could I execute a task with such perfection, such precision. I especially liked it when patterns called for long stretches of one particular colour: grass, sky, sea – all of these were a joy. I avoided patterns with dappled sunlight.

Siblings would occasionally shatter my reverie. "Muuuum," my older sister might whine, running into the kitchen where I had positioned myself in front of a crackling fire, threads splayed across my lap, "Lucy's wearing my top!" I would roll my eyes and sigh.

"What a tragedy," I'd mutter to myself, as a log collapsed, sending a shower of displaced sparks hurtling up the chimney chute, "it's a wonder you can go on living."

When my brother moaned about the lateness of dinner only to receive the same frustrated response from mum – "well you can have some fruit if you're hungry," or "don't say starving – there are people who are *actually* starving," I would nod my head in agreement, and thank God that of us four siblings, it was I who had received the lion's share of culture and refinement.

Even my parents, who should have known better, disappointed me on occasion, interrupting my labours to help them with menial tasks such as setting the table, or rounding everyone up for dinner. "Couldn't one of the others go?" I'd plead, gesturing in the direction of my brother or sisters' bedrooms. "I'm a few stitches off finishing this cow's udder." When my protestations fell on deaf ears, I would sulkily abandon my work, positive that I had been born into the wrong time, the wrong place, the wrong family. In summer, the warmth of the fire no longer required, I would migrate to the lounge room where I was able to sew, uninterrupted, for hours. Before settling myself on one of our Aztec-printed couches – couches so ugly they *had to be* comfortable – there was the careful selection of suitable background music. Classical, I imagined, was the genre most befitting a recreational activity as noble and antiquated as mine. I could, after all, have been one of any number of classic heroines from the Regency-period and onwards. Jane Austen's Lizzie, Emily Brontë's Catherine, Georgette Heyer's Arabella – we were interwoven, the three of us, by needle and thread.

Inconceivable as it may be to the millennial, there was a time before Spotify, and before that mp3s, and *before that* the compact disc. Rewind further, past the cassette, and you arrive at the record, that glorious black saucer, guided in its rotating, concentric path by arm and needle. "Make sure you place it down gently" my dad said, overseeing my first solo attempt. This was as momentous an occasion as the time I finally received my "pen licence." The pencil had been outgrown, and with it the eraser, replaced by that last word in sophistication and maturity: indelible ink. As thrilling as a licence to drive,

the pen screamed: *I am a grown-up now, I no longer make mistakes.*

Round and round the record spun, issuing forth, as if by magic, Mozart's *Moonlight Sonata* or Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. I revelled in the majestic Largos of winter and the frantic Prestos of summer. Spring passed as I backstitched the petals of daisies and tulips. While I completed the last of a long stream of raindrops, Autumn came and went. Although I loved Vivaldi and would later learn to play some of the easier parts of *Four Seasons* on my violin, Chopin was my favourite composer, his preludes and fugues, his melancholy nocturnes, evoking a lingering yearning (for what exactly, I'm still unsure).

Humanity lost something in its search for perfection. When I listen to Chopin now on my computer or iPhone, the music seems somehow *too* clear, *too* polished. Gone is the record's soothing crackle, the tape's faint accompanying sputter, and in its stead, cold, crisp, precision. Elsewhere, the same effects can be observed: retina-blasting high-definition TVs are startlingly accurate, devoid of that old-world cinematic fuzz. Technology, it turns out, has outdone itself in its quest to reproduce the "real" world, the very same one its viewers were trying to escape.

Occasionally I would play other music – Gene Pitney or Patsy Cline, perhaps – ABBA, if I was feeling particularly reckless. *Dancing Queeeeeeeen, young and sweeeeet, only seventeeeeeeen*, I'd wail as I rethreaded a needle or tightened my wooden hoop, careful to avoid unsightly puckering. It wouldn't be too long now, I thought, until I was 17, until I was shaving my legs and wearing deodorant and bras and all the rest. *Who will I be?* I wondered. *And what kind of pressures will I face then?* "I pass on grass," I'd say to myself in preparation for my high school years, waving aside an imaginary joint with a dramatic sweep of the hand. "Wouldn't touch the stuff with a ten-foot pole."

In 1996, long before I would pick up the mantle, my brother was easily the most rebellious of us four children. He had long hair and listened to Nirvana and projected what I thought of as a general "bad boy" image which, in hindsight, made him look like just about every other 17-year-old. Around that time, when I was completing my second cross-stitch – an adorable number that featured teddy bears, Raggedy Anne dolls and small pooches with backstitched eyes – my sister divulged an earth-shattering revelation. Apparently at the library one day, she had overheard my brother talking to a bunch of friends. Midway through the conversation he had sworn, she said, her face ashen as she recalled the memory, said *shit this or shit that or shit something she couldn't remember because how horrific and if he could say that what other words was he saying and she would have remembered exactly what the context was but the shock of it made her knees buckle under her so badly she could barely make it to her next class.*

Us three girls were, naturally, horrified. After the initial shock, we all shed a few tears for our prodigal son of a brother and decided we shouldn't tell mum and dad because of the potential severity of the consequences. Who knew what kind of punishment he'd face – probably grounding for a month,

or dish duty for the next two years. After all, we'd get busted for telling each other to shut up, let alone use a *legitimate* swear word. Later, though, racked by guilt, unable to bear the weight of my sister's disclosure, I confessed to my parents on behalf of my brother. *Please let him not be excommunicated or evicted from the house*, I thought, knocking on my parents' bedroom door. *He looks tough, but I don't know how he'd go on the street*.

"Thanks for telling me," my mum said when I told her, looking a lot less horrified than I'd imagined. Even worse, she didn't seem as pleased with me as I thought she would, or *should* be. Was it only me who was concerned about my brother's integrity, or lack thereof? Sure, he might be popular, *but at what cost?* Next thing he'd be shoplifting or shooting up at the dinner table while my parents sighed and said, "Kids, eh? What can you do?"

Back in the mid-nineties, you had to carefully market your quirks. If questioned on my cross-stitch, for example, or any other similarly unconventional pursuits, I'd have strategies in place. "I'm such a weirdo," I might say, accompanying the statement with a few silly gestures or a joke at my own expense. The kids would laugh and move on to someone else, someone weirder. A bit of light self-deprecation, I realised, was the ultimate means of *getting there first*. Simone Alessi,³⁰ on the other hand, was just *plain odd*, with one eye that refused to follow the other, and a gaze that always landed somewhere just past your left shoulder. She, naturally, deserved our pity. If we hung out with her, it was because we were feeling charitable, magnanimous, eager to do our good deed for the day. It never occurred to me that her lazy eye was my cross-stitch, that she had simply failed to own her eccentricities in a socially acceptable way.

Thanks to irony's iron-clad grip on this particular cultural moment, however, such concerns are now irrelevant. In 2017, you don't need an excuse for your quirks. People will assume that everything "cray" you do is, like, "obvs" ironic. *More power to 'em*, you'll think as someone in a leopard-print leotard rides by on a penny farthing, a pet gopher peeking out of their backpack. "Attaboy," you'll say, chuckling, after someone steals your handbag. "That there," you'll say, nudging your friend and pointing in the direction of your assailant, "that there is performance art at its finest."

³⁰ Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

POTENTIAL CRITICISMS:



"You know, we're just not reaching that guy."

(Fig. 87)

I term these “potential” criticisms, due to the dearth of scholarship *explicitly* refuting connections between Christianity and carnival.³¹ Tellingly, there is much more literature *defending* the connection. The most obvious reason for this defensive position, I believe, is due to the *prima facie* redundancy of the argument. As Irina Denischenko rightly notes: “On the surface, it appears that the Bakhtinian carnival is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity, which supports the ‘official seriousness’ that carnival, and specifically carnival laughter, aims to overthrow” (2008, 1). Denischenko’s statement is backed up by multiple disparaging references to the church and religion scattered throughout *Rabelais*, Bakhtin clearly equating certain aspects of the medieval church with extra-carnival life and the reinstatement of oppressive hierarchical structures. My contestation, however, is that a false equation between the religiosity of particular historical institutions and Christianity itself

³¹ There is, however, much debate over whether the *origins* of carnival are secular or religious. In his book, *The Mediaeval Stage*, noted literary critic E.K. Chambers chronicles in detail a process by which originally pagan rituals were replaced by Christian ones (1996). Contrast this view, however, with Jeremy DeWaal, who states: “The new consensus among historians is that [Carnival] emerged in the Middle Ages, with a nearly thousand-year gap in sources separating pre-Christian festivals from European Carnival” (2013, 500). Similarly, in Max Harris’s detailed studies of modern and ancient festive traditions, he claims that while it was indeed the church that eventually suppressed carnival, it was also the church that *initiated* it, and that the notion that Carnival is associated with pre-Christian rites has little scholarly support (2003, 139). Thankfully, the origins of carnival are not the subject of this discussion – I would be lucky to find a spare 10 hours (let alone years) to devote to the topic.

unnecessarily distances Christianity from carnival. In this section, I seek to extricate the two, and to highlight that a Christianity divested of its external trappings of religiosity displays multiple carnivalesque traits.

FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH?

On first impression, the carnival's intolerance of seriousness, dogma and the "mystic terror of God" (Bakhtin 1984, 90) seem to negate any connections with religion, Bakhtin frequently referencing this antagonism, noting that the medieval laughter of the carnival built "its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church" (1984, 88). He states: "The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety" (1984, 7). Further on in *Rabelais*, Bakhtin suggests that the laughter of the carnival constituted "the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself" (1984, 90-91). Clark and Holquist note of carnival that it "was one of the few areas that the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church did not reach" (1984, 300). They go on to observe the following: "Carnivals are ritually devoid of mysticism and piety. They are without prayer or magic" (1984, 300).

Denischenko, however, notes that "the religious dimension of . . . Bakhtin's work currently remains under-explored in Western criticism" (2008, 1). In *Carnival and Incarnation*, Charles Lock highlights a similar tendency, stating:

In the West he has been celebrated variously as a radical, as the Soviet Union's only distinguished indigenous Marxist (however deviant), as a proto-post-structuralist who may yet help to salvage a humanist ideology, and much more within those parameters. In the Soviet Union, by vivid contrast, according to Clark and Holquist, "many see Bakhtin as a religious philosopher in the Orthodox tradition" (1991, 68-69).

Slavic scholar Ruth Coates echoes these sentiments in her book *Christianity and Bakhtin*, arguing for the superiority of the latter view. While she does not attempt to lay claim to Bakhtin as a Christian philosopher per se, she states that he is nonetheless "a philosopher whose work is fed by certain aspects of the Christian vision of and for the world" (2005, 22). In her book, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, fellow Slavic scholar Caryl Emerson states that Bakhtin in no way viewed carnival as a "threat to . . . the rigors of the Christian faith" (2000, 37). In defence of this statement, she offers the following anecdotal evidence: "Bakhtin's right-hand man for the final ten years, Vladimir Turbin, remembers Bakhtin saying in Saransk (in a delighted whisper): 'And the Gospels are carnival too!'"

(2007, 37). Turbin's recollections would indeed be puzzling if Bakhtin unequivocally pitted Christianity against carnival.³²

Understood properly, Coates argues, the Incarnation is a profoundly carnivalesque act in that it stands in direct opposition to what Bakhtin describes as "gloomy, *disincarnated* medieval truth," instead enacting the degradation typical of grotesque realism which "*bring[s] down to earth, turn[s] their subject into flesh*" (as quoted in Coates 2005, 132-133). She states:

Indeed, Christianity, at its inception, may be viewed as nothing other than a materialisation of God, and a degradation, a debasement of the entire Jewish/Old Testament world-view, a literal turning of its subject into flesh in order to overthrow its elitism, with respect both to the common Jew and to the Gentile, once and for all (2005, 133).

In the Incarnation, the gap between the sacred and the profane is bridged in a most concrete manner, thus embodying grotesque realism's "essential principle" of "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 1984, 19-20).

Additionally (as has been touched upon in earlier sections of this chapter), Christ presents us with a decidedly anti-religious, anti-conservative figure, his ministry reflecting this fact. Crucially, as we have seen, it is for religious groups such as the Sadducees and Pharisees with their strict observance of the law and practiced solemnity, that Jesus reserves his strongest judgment. Conversely, it is those commonly considered to be living a decidedly *irreligious* lifestyle (tax collectors, Gentiles, prostitutes) with whom Jesus spent the majority of his time.

In his co-written book *The Meaning of Jesus*, leading New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright discusses this tendency of Jesus' to associate with "the wrong sort of people," stating:

Jesus offered to all and sundry a welcome that . . . shocked many of his contemporaries to the core. . . . He was welcoming sinners into fellowship with himself *precisely as part of his kingdom announcement*. . . . Jesus was offering forgiveness to all and sundry, out there on the street, without requiring that they go through the normal channels. That was his real offense (Borg and Wright 2007, 38-39).

³² Carnival, as we have seen in Chapter Two, is regarded by some critics as ultimately conservative. (Representatives of the conservative, "safety-valve" or "containment" agenda include, notably, Greenblatt (1994), Eagleton (1981) and Geertz (1973).) The notion of *Gospels as carnival*, viewed in this light, loses its potentially radical or subversive meaning. Importantly, however, it is *Bakhtin* who is claiming the connection, and it is *his* understanding of carnival (however contested) that we must return to. This is carnival, in Chris Humphrey's terms, as "a particular understanding and vision of the past" (2000, 169) despite any potential historical shortcomings.

It is a baffling revision of how the conservative “religious” constituent of that era would have understood God to operate should he walk the earth. Wright goes on to state: “ultimately, the challenge Jesus offered was the challenge to a crazy, subversive wisdom in which ordinary human wisdom, and conventional Jewish wisdom, would be stood on its head” (2007, 39). Jesus’ debasement of self in human form, coupled with an ethos which actively eschews hypocrisy and external acts of religiosity, sets himself in opposition to the practices of both the church of his time and the sixteenth-century church detailed by Bakhtin.³³

Furthermore, the church, as we have seen, is not the sole target of Bakhtin’s opprobrium. Rather, it is figured as one amongst a number of ruling orders that are *potentially* repressive and antithetical to the carnival spirit. As Coates states:

The primary target of carnival, and by implication that of its eulogist Bakhtin, is arguably not so much the feudal system or the Catholic (or Protestant) Church nor is it the more basic ideologies of class society or religion; rather it is the captivity of the human spirit as such, its enslavement to fear (2005, 127).

Coates goes on to note that “the oppressive strategies of these institutions, Bakhtin makes clear, are inherent in all power structures, whatever their ideological peculiarities” (2005, 127). Viewed in this light, Bakhtin’s critique of the Church is less an unreserved denunciation of Christianity than it is an attack on the fear and oppression that institutions such as the church can (and have) wielded.

Possibly the most convincing argument to be made for connecting carnival and Christianity, however, lies in Bakhtin’s endorsement of Desiderius Erasmus’ classic satirical essay, *The Praise of Folly*. Crucially, Erasmus devotes a significant portion of *Folly* to condemning the external trappings of the church while *simultaneously extolling the virtues of orthodox Christianity*. It is inconceivable that Bakhtin would call Erasmus’ essay (as he does) “the work which is precisely the most in tune with the Rabelaisian world” (1984, 134), and “one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature” (1984, 14), while disagreeing with its positive and essentially carnivalesque depiction of the Christian faith.

In *Folly*, Erasmus writes from the perspective of Folly personified, a figure he depicts in fool’s garb, delivering a self-directed encomium to a large assembly of learned individuals. Folly begins her speech with the grandiose claim that it is “she – the only she . . . whose divine influence makes gods and men rejoice” (2015, 7), before laying claim to various other virtues, many of which serve as mitigators of

³³ The Parable of The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (recounted in Luke 18: 9-14) concisely exemplifies Jesus’ condemnation of external acts of religiosity.

human vices. She notes, for example, her ability to promote an otherwise-ailing amity among men: "In sum, no society, no union in life, could be either pleasant or lasting without me. . . . Were you to bar me out, each man would be so incapable of getting along with any other that he would become a stench in his own nostrils" (2015, 28). Folly then turns her attention away from humanity's shared follies towards those of various powerful social and academic persons and professions; among them, doctors and lawyers, poets, philosophers and businessmen, all of whom are critiqued for their posturing, inanity, ineffectiveness and irrelevance. Folly's most scathing critique, however, is reserved for certain individuals within the religious order – theologians, priests, monks, popes and cardinals who, despite their observed solemnity, are particularly indebted to her: "I am sure you perceive how much is owed to me by this class of men, who with their ceremonials and silly pedantries and bawling exercise a kind of despotism over mortal men, and believe themselves to be Pauls and Anthonies" (2015, 93).

In the third and final portion of her speech, Folly details her intimate connection with the Christian religion which, she claims, "has no alliance whatever with wisdom" (2015, 118), highlighting instead the Apostle Paul's frequent references to fools and foolishness:

'Suffer fools gladly,' he says, speaking of himself; and again, 'Receive me as a fool'; also, 'I do not speak according to God, but as if in foolishness.' Again, he says in another place, 'We are fools for Christ's sake.' From so great a writer you hear such great commendations of folly! (2015, 114).

Folly goes on to highlight the countercultural, paradoxical, nature of Jesus' ministry, noting of him that "He preferred to ride upon a donkey, though had He chosen He could have mounted the back of a lion without danger" (2015, 115). She then proceeds to specifically attribute the trait of foolishness to Christ:

And that Christ, in order to relieve the folly of mankind, though Himself 'the wisdom of the Father,' was willing in some manner to be made a fool when He took upon Himself the nature of a man and was found in fashion as a man?. . . Nor did He wish to bring healing by any other means than by "the foolishness of the cross," and by weak and stupid apostles upon whom He carefully enjoined folly, dissuading them from wisdom, while He incited them by the example of children, lilies, mustard-seed, and sparrows – witless things and deficient in sense (2015, 116).

The idea of Christ as fool, or some variant of that theme, appears in myriad literature.³⁴ In *The Feast of Fools*, for example, Harvey Cox notes that “the symbol of Christ as clown has deep historical roots” (1972, 168), before depicting Jesus’ resemblance to an array of “fool-like” figures:

Christ himself for them must have been something of a holy fool. . . . Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour, he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirizes existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel, he frequents dinners and parties. At the end he is costumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst snickers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim (1972, 169).

His observations on the trajectory of the church in subsequent eras, however, is illuminating:

The symbol of Christ the clown seems imminently right for the earliest period of Christian history. It could not persist, however, when the church’s view of itself moved from the ridiculous to the sublime. What place is there for caricature when the church’s regal vestments are taken seriously? When its crowns and sceptres are made of real gold instead of thorns and wood? A church that actually holds power and reigns has little capacity for self-caricature or irony. (169-170).

H. Cox’s implication is that the church lost sight of the “foolishness” of its origins. Such a church is the kind against which Bakhtin pits carnival and, significantly, Erasmus pits Christianity. As Joi Christians notes, Erasmus believed “that the essence of Christianity lay not in the rituals, rules, and doctrine which characterised the sixteenth-century church, but a living Christianity according to which a person is ‘innerly changed and transformed into that which [he] learn[s] from Scripture’” (1998, 70).

Donald Gwynn Watson’s observation in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly and the Spirit of Carnival* that Erasmus “incorporated the spirit of Carnival into the meaning and philosophical celebration of Christ” (1979, 353) is evinced by the fact that “true” Christianity is presented as oppositional to the extra-carnival “wisdom” of exploitative hierarchical structures that promote power, wealth and external religiosity. Instead, Erasmus depicts the Christian faith as aligned with carnival through its topsy-turvy, inverted, countercultural logic and shared trait of “folly.”

³⁴ As a fool (Campbell and Cilliers 2012, Erasmus 2015), a trickster (Haraway 2004, Campbell and Cilliers 2012), a harlequin and jester (H. Cox 1972), a clown (Adiprasetya 2013, D. Adams 1997) and a riddler (T. Thatcher 2006).

Roadworthy



(Fig. 88)

I bought a near brand new car several years ago. The kind that smells like leather and has fully functioning brakes. It was one of the most reckless vehicle-related things I'd done since hitting a Volvo in mum's car in 2012 while under the influence of a drug called *wanting to get home quicker*. She told me that she was just glad that I was alive: "I don't care about the car," she said, over the phone, when I told her what had happened, "I only care about the cargo." It was a favourite line of hers, and she thought it quite clever. "Cargo," she'd say, pointing at whichever of us kids were driving, "not car."

"Yes mum," we'd say, rolling our eyes, "we get it." She was especially nervous if all of us travelled in the same car, my brother at the wheel, paranoid that with one wrong turn or moment of inattentiveness, she could be rendered childless.

On this particular occasion, though, she said it with a little less gusto, a little less appreciation for the perceived genius of her wordplay. Especially, that is, when I got home and she saw the cavernous dent in what was previously an immaculate, year-old Subaru Forrester. Her eyes misted up a little, and I wondered whether she might have survived the loss of, if not four of her children, potentially one.

Previously, I had been the mortified owner of a beat up '95 Holden Barina – an off-white, low-slung toaster of a car with little to recommend it other than a surprisingly good sound system. It had no air conditioning and no power steering which meant that on a sufficiently hot day, a U-turn could induce heat stroke. I could only really do seven point turns in that thing which meant that I could spend an entire afternoon in a tight circle.

It was my Menzies-era Toyota Corolla, though, a car which made one think fondly of the horse and

cart, that almost did me in. Not by embarrassment, as was the case with the Barina, but because the windows didn't work. When I say they didn't work, I mean that while you could *see* out of them well enough, they didn't roll down. And when one is driving around in a metal tin with no air-con on a 40-degree day, that kind of functionality is imperative. I could have had them fixed, of course, but the car itself was worth less than the repair cost, so that didn't seem prudent. There were more important things, after all, for me to spend my hard-earned money on: clothes, shoes, makeup and the like. No, the windows would have to wait. Instead, I would drive, shvitzing, from one red light to the next, desperately swinging the door open and shut to generate some air flow. Even the window washer boys avoided me.

Among the many other "issues" that plagued the Corolla was a broken petrol gauge. It would work perfectly 90% of the time then, as if in a fit of pique, go rogue, grossly overestimating the amount of fuel in my tank. A more observant person might have kept a rough track of how long it had been since they last filled, but that person is *not me*. I barely pay attention when crossing the road, let alone track my fuel consumption, so on several occasions I found myself on the side of the road, sweaty, desperate and wondering *how the hell do people differentiate between the hitchhike sign and a thumbs up?*

One specific instance has stuck with me; has lingered long after I finally drove the Corolla into the ground, long after I upgraded, and then upgraded again, finally the owner of a car that was me-on-wheels: slick, sophisticated and extra roomy in the boot. If ever I broke down, I wouldn't try to hail other drivers down – that seemed far too needy. Instead, I would sit on the bonnet wiping sweat from my brow and looking pathetic and hopeful in equal measure, assuming that this would be sufficient indication of my plight. It didn't seem to be working for me, though, on this particular occasion (possibly because I was wearing pants with a hole near the crotch), so I tried a series of other expressions, all of which failed to elicit sympathy from passers-by.

Had my pants been *holy* perhaps the Priests would have stopped. They didn't, and neither did the Levites. After ten minutes of painful facial contortions (the last suggesting something close to constipation), someone finally pulled over. It was a bikie, and by bikie, I mean this guy had a chin plait that would have looked great on the back of a five-year-old girl's head and so many badges – *Route 66, Harley Davidson, Unforgiven* etc. – I was surprised he didn't have a flat tyre. He looked like the kind of guy that might feature on a *Current Affair* or *Today Tonight*, the ones who come out of court covering their face with a jacket while a rough-looking girlfriend swats at the journalists' cameras and yells things like "**bleep* off you *bleeping* mongrels,*" or "*he ain't done nothing wrong – he wouldn't hurt a *bleeping* fly.*"

He had no desire to make small talk: "Get on," he said in a voice as gravelly as the roads he'd no doubt travelled down, and with no dignity left and zero alternatives, I did exactly as he said.

Now I imagine he expected me to hold on to that bar at the back, but as we hooned off, I instinctively threw my arms around him. It was probably the first time he'd been hugged in 30 years, and he looked round at me like I was a creep, but a creep that had given him a hug, and I knew that when we dismounted he would try to avoid eye contact and mumble something about *fuckin' hayfever, it fuckin' makes your eyes all watery and shit*. I only managed to get my arms as far as his rib cage because he'd clearly had one too many Hell's Angel cakes, so in the end I kind of clung to the edges of his vest, hoping that if we crashed his enormous beer belly could cushion the blow.

Chivalry, it turns out, is not dead in the bikie community. When we made it to the petrol station, he took care of business while I waited on the forecourt, guarding his beloved motorbike. Like I said, I've run out of petrol several times in the Corolla, and every time I ask for a petrol can from the "point of sale officers" (I kid you not, this is what **we're** called), I can see the thought clouds hovering above their heads. *You loser*, they think, as they swipe through your purchases and take your cash, *who doesn't check their fuel gauge?* Finally, they smile, look disdainfully at your Uggies and say "Have a good day," like they hope you'll get run over on the way back to your car. With my new friend, though, I would have been invincible. I felt like coming in and standing behind him and yelling out stuff like "you give me any more lip and my dad's gonna make you wish you were never born."

I didn't. I just sat on the Harley wishing he'd hurry up because people were looking at me like I stole Lindy Chamberlain's baby. One man pulled his children closer to him as my rescuer strode past, and an elderly lady made such a wide berth around the motorbike on her way back to her car that I imagine she thought our degeneracy was catching. When he finally came back with the goods, I was relieved, eager to leave: we took off with a screech, blanketing the forecourt and its occupants in a cloud of exhaust fumes.

Me and my sugar-daddy now bonded by our outsider status, I threw my arms around him with an air of comfortable familiarity that belied our short acquaintance. It was starting to feel less Rebel Rousers than Roman Holiday by this stage, and as the breeze whipped through my hair, I was starting to wonder how much I would get on a trade-in for the Corolla when I realised that we had reached my car. *And passed my car. And kept on going.*

This is it, I thought. *This is how I die, done in by a not so good Samaritan*. In as cool a voice as I could muster, I said, "Excuse me, but I think that was my car back there." He didn't answer, so I shouted "THAT WAS MY CAR BACK THERE, WHY ARE WE STILL RIDING? WHAT IS GOING ON? LET ME OFF THIS INSTANT OR I'LL KNIFE YOU IN THE NECK, SO HELP ME GOD," and then I realised he was just trying to find a safe spot to turn around.

When I was 14, possibly 15, I remember being woken by my dad early one Saturday morning. *Not cool*, I thought, as I heard him knocking at the door. "Megs," he said, in a stage whisper, "Megs, are you awake?" It was the one day, I figured, that was mine: I, and only I, should decide at what time I woke, *if at all*.

He opened the door, shuffling in two strangers: "meet Maurizio and Tiziana," he said, beaming infuriatingly. I propped myself up on my elbow and attempted a smile. "Hi," I said.

Dad had been to the airport earlier to pick up some American friends of ours and, as it turned out, two Italians he'd never met before. Their hotel had apparently cancelled their accommodation and so naturally he'd suggested they stay with our family for the week. It was hard to know who was crazier – dad, for inviting these strangers into our home, or those same strangers for accepting the invitation. If it were up to me, I thought, I would have done a background check first. These guys, after all, could have all kinds of skeletons in their closet. Sure, they looked nice, but what were they hiding? Did their hotel *actually* cancel their accommodation, or was this whole thing a ruse to murder some kindly foreigners in their beds and make off with their belongings? *Good luck with that*, I thought, surveying our lounge room and snorting, *you chose the wrong house to burgle*.

Sadly, I didn't get the chance to say I told you so. Far from being psychopaths, Dad's two new Italian friends were a delight. After they left, I cried: *I'll write every day*, I gestured, when we dropped them off at the airport, *but possibly not on Saturdays because I have a very active social calendar*. Even the presents they left us failed to console me.

Years later, long after dad's death, my mum (and later my brother) would fly to Italy to stay at Maurizio and Tiziana's house in the small town of Bagnacavallo, half an hour's drive east of Ravenna. Between taking in the breathtaking mosaics of the Byzantine empire and gorging themselves on Maurizio's home-made gelato, they recalled with fondness the shared madness of their initial encounter. "Crazy," mum would say, chuckling, pointing to the relevant page in her *Beginners Guide to Italian*. "*Molto* crazy."

While the complete strangers staying at our house for a week was a once-off, the mentality behind it wasn't. My parents, it seemed, just couldn't help taking in strays. At least one night a week, we would have people over for dinner – sometimes they were friends, and sometimes they were random people I'd met a handful of times, if at all. Of these guests, as far as I saw it, there were two types: those *like us*, and those *not like us*. One man we had over regularly owned a burger joint somewhere, always wore the same grey suit, and did a high-pitched, squeaky, foppish accent so regularly that you couldn't tell where fake Doug ended and real Doug began. "Oooer, please pass mee the pepper," he'd say, in an affected voice, then, "and while you're there, ooer, could you grab the salt?" Us kids would kick each other under the table or raise a surreptitious eyebrow once he had turned his attention to our parents.

Other eccentrics lingered. There was Vic, a short, rail-thin man who lived with his mum in his 40s and had a nervous twitch to match his nervous personality. He smoked so much that his face, at least in my memory, resembled a tomato, and his hands shook when he spoke. As I watched him through a slit in our lounge room shutters light his fourth cigarette for the night, I was firmly convinced of his *not like us* status.

I was polite with our guests, though – exceedingly so, I thought, all things considered – and I didn't mind sharing my dinner table with them, especially Doug, whose birthday presents (Archie comics, Derwent watercolour pencils, cold hard cash) were always on point. At the back of my mind, I imagined that what was taking place might be described using adjectives like *charitable* or *benevolent* – that us nice respectable folks were extending an olive branch to the village pariahs.

I'd like to think that I've changed, though, that my older self, with her nuanced understanding of the world, no longer thinks in terms of *us* and *them*. And then I recall my broke down car and my badge-riddled bkie, and I wonder whether much has changed at all, or if I'm still a prig on the back of a bike telling my rescuer to return me to polite society.

TRUTH: IT'S ALL RELATIVE

Another potential problematic of linking carnival and Christianity is that carnival, as we have seen, is imbued with, and characterised by, a sense of “gay relativity.” This presents an apparent contradiction with a faith which makes certain exclusive claims to “truth.”³⁵ I believe one must be careful, however, not to conflate Bakhtin’s conception of carnival relativity with the modern concept of *relativism*. Certainly, if thoroughgoing philosophical *relativism* underpinned the carnival, this would be a difficult aspect to reconcile with the Christian worldview. Crucially, however, at no point does Bakhtin abandon the word “truth.” Conversely, he uses it on many occasions throughout *Rabelais*: “Laughter must liberate the gay truth of the world from the veils of gloomy lies spun by the seriousness of fear, suffering, and violence” (1984, 174); “from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man” (1984, 91); “Medieval laughter, when it triumphed over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world and by power, boldly unveiled the truth about both” (1984, 92).

Rather, I believe Bakhtin is opposed to *monologically-driven* truth claims, and the adoption of a stance which is marked by inflexibility, exclusivity and the dismissal of conflicting “voices.” The kind of monologism which, Bakhtin claims, rears its head in European rationalism’s “cult of a unified and exclusive reason” (1994b, 82), and which ensures that “genuine interaction of consciousnesses . . . and . . . genuine dialogue is impossible” (1994b, 81). The concept of “truth,” however, is not uncritically wed with such ideological or philosophical monologism, Bakhtin stating:

It is quite possible to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses, one that cannot in principle be fitted into the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses. The monologic way of perceiving cognition and truth is only one of the possible ways (1994b, 81).

Here, Bakhtin seems to open up the possibility of “truth” or truths reached by dialogic means, by an ultimately egalitarian form of interaction whereby “other thoughts and ideas – untrue or indifferent from the author’s point of view, not fitting into his worldview” are not (as the case would be in monologic discourse) simply stripped of their signifying power or “polemically repudiated” (1994b, 80). This monologism, or exclusion of conflicting “voices,” as we have seen, is aligned with extra-carnival life, or “official culture.” Conversely, Bakhtin states of carnival festivities that “the element of relativity and of becoming was emphasized, *in opposition to the immovable and extratemporal stability* of the medieval hierarchy” (1984, 82, emphasis mine). Thus, carnival relativity is defined by

³⁵ Jesus frequently uses the expression “I tell you the truth.” In John 14:6, Jesus makes the following absolutizing claim: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Bakhtin in terms of its opposition to rigidity, inflexibility and closure rather than its dismissal of truth claims altogether.

In his article *Religion and Sense of Humour: An A Priori Incompatibility?*, Vassilis Saroglou notes that religion requires from life a “reduction of uncertainty” (an uncertainty which, he claims, religion resists in its quest for objective meaning and a general bent towards closedmindedness). Adopting the popular definition of humour as the perception of incongruity, Saroglou offers the following insight: “It seems reasonable to suspect that religion may not be attracted to a celebration of incongruity, ambiguity and, most importantly, possibility of nonsense” (2002, 195). While his article is concerned specifically with the disconnect between religion and *humour*, its pertinence to the current discussion is clear, Saroglou aligning religion with an inflexibility and closure that mirrors official culture’s “‘eternal,’ ‘immovable,’ ‘absolute,’ ‘unchangeable’” characteristics (Bakhtin 1984, 83). Conversely, words like “incongruity,” “ambiguity” and “nonsense” – all terms synonymous with carnival relativity and its “gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character” (Bakhtin 1984, 83), are depicted as anathema to the religious mindset.

Certain aspects of Saroglou’s argument are justified, particularly his claim that humour has, historically-speaking, often been at odds with the position taken by Christian theologians. Here, he echoes Bakhtin’s observations on early Christianity, namely that “only permanent seriousness, remorse, and sorrow for his sins befit the Christian” (1984, 73). P. Berger concurs, stating:

There is a long line of grim theologians. Repeatedly there are negative comments on laughter, which is understood as expressing worldliness, sinful insouciance, and lack of faith. . . . One does not have to be a Nietzschean to look upon the history of Christian theology as a depressingly lachrymose affair (2014, 232).³⁶

However valid Saroglou’s depiction of the troubled historical relationship between Christianity and humour, his surmise that religious people, specifically, are uncomfortable with the kind of gay relativity that incongruity, ambiguity and nonsense presuppose is, I believe, flawed.

In *Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth*, Carol A. Newsom advocates a dialogic approach to reading and interpreting the Bible, asserting that throughout many of its books “one can easily identify a plurality of unmerged voices” (1996, 296). She goes on to state: “When one begins to look at the biblical text in terms of the ‘symposia’ that might be arranged among its voices, the possibilities are endless” (1996, 305). Žižek discerns in the Bible a similar dialogic potentiality, arguing (contra

³⁶ Interestingly, P. Berger goes on to note that the theologian’s mistrust of humour nonetheless reflected the wider view of Western philosophy and philosophers in general from classical antiquity, stating: “It is plausible to assume that [these philosophers’] Christian successors simply took over this attitude, only deepening it by linking it with a religious deprecation of this world and of the human condition” (2014, 236).

Saroglou's theory) that reduction of uncertainty is actually a pervasive feature of the *atheistic* worldview, belief simply being transferred to another kind of God. In a clip from his film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, Žižek states: "Christianity is much more atheist than the usual atheism, which can claim there is no God and so on, but nonetheless it retains a certain trust into [*sic*] the Big Other. This Big Other can be called natural necessity, evolution, or whatever" (DougEskew 2013).

To illustrate this point, Žižek turns to the book of Job, which recounts the story of a "blameless" man who is the subject of a contract between God and Satan whereby Satan is allowed to test Job by sending upon him various calamities. Satan suggests that in the wake of these tragedies Job will curse God (a prediction that is ultimately disproved). After Job has been subjected to the final test, three of his friends visit offering different reasons for the tragedies, all of which are ultimately proved false. When God finally does communicate with Job, he does not provide a concrete answer for Job's suffering. Rather, he points to his omnipotence and the awesomeness of creation. Of Job's three friends, Žižek notes the following: "Their underlying hypothesis or axiom is 'it must have some meaning, if we know it or not.' And [Job's] absolute greatness . . . is to reject this meaning" (Zizekian Studies 2015). When God intervenes, Žižek notes, he confirms that Job was right in opposing his friend's rationalisations. Žižek goes on to say: "Today this pressure of "meaning" is strong. . . . Beware of succumbing to this pressure. . . . Pagan universe is all-intelligent" (Zizekian Studies 2015).³⁷

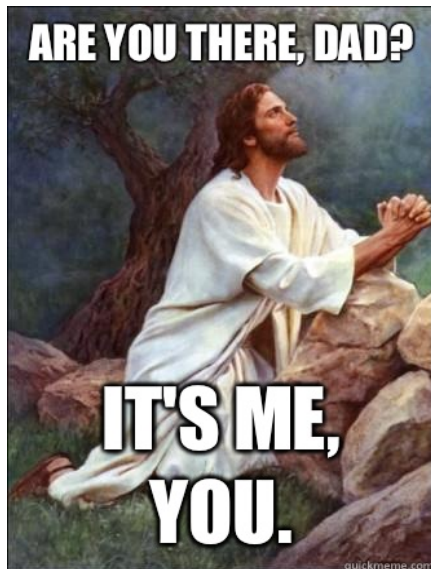
In G.K. Chesterton's short essay *A Defence of Nonsense*, Chesterton similarly uses the book of Job to undermine the notion that religious faith contributes to a sense of closure, positing instead a tendency towards disjuncture:

It is significant that in the greatest religious poem existent, the Book of Job, the argument which convinces the infidel is not . . . a picture of the ordered beneficence of the Creation; but, on the contrary, a picture of the huge and undecipherable unreason of it. . . . This simple sense of wonder at the shapes of things, and at their exuberant independence of our intellectual standards and our trivial definitions, is the basis of spirituality as it is the basis of nonsense (2000, 298).

In many ways, becoming or remaining a Christian requires you to be very comfortable with incongruity, ambiguity and nonsense, a point reflected in the writing of Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, whose *Fear and Trembling* (2006) frequently references the "absurd" and "paradoxical" aspects of Christianity. Morreall notes that for Kierkegaard: "Religious people, especially Christians,

³⁷ My intention here is not to pit secularism against Christianity, nor *necessarily* to claim for the Christian perspective a unique link with the "gay relativity" of carnival. Rather, I wish to challenge the misperception that the religious outlook, over and above the secular, displays the kind of monologic tendencies outlined by Saroglou.

need to have a sense of humor to live with the incongruities in such puzzling beliefs as the Incarnation and the Trinity” (2008, 228).



(Fig. 89)

In *The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic*, Hyers speaks of humour as “the correlate of the relativity of faith and the ambiguities of existence” (1968, 77). He goes on to note: “If there were no element of confidence and finality in faith, it would not be faith but despair. It would not represent the humble recognition, within the act of faith, of *the relativity of all finite perspectives*, but the nihilistic relativity of cynicism” (1968, 77-78, emphasis mine). Here, Hyers weds the seemingly paradoxical “relativity” of our finite perspective with the element of “confidence and finality” we find in the Christian faith. In this sense, he aligns himself with Bakhtin, who similarly sees no contradiction in speaking of both the “gay relativity” of carnival and carnivalesque laughter’s status as “one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole” (Bakhtin 1984, 66).

Captain Chastity to the Rescue



(Fig. 90) *Back in MY day...*

"It's just that they have no self-respect," I said to Doreen the other day as the bus lurched around the corner, both of us reaching for the handrail. Outside a blue Falcon peeled past, its owner blasting expletive-laden rap music: *she's a ho, mofo, and what's mo, I'm too ol', fo' sho*.

"I've said the same thing a million times," Doreen sighed, unzipping her handbag. From its depths, she retrieved an embroidered handkerchief, its laced borders decorated with pale blue wreaths of Forget-me-nots. "And if you don't have respect for yourself..." Doreen trailed off, blowing her nose into the handkerchief. I closed my eyes and nodded, laying a hand on her forearm.

"Exactly," I whispered. "Exactly."

We were speaking, of course, about this latest generation – a generation which has relegated common decency to the dustbin of time. In front of me, a girl wearing a postage stamp-sized skirt and singlet coughed. "There you go," I said, as one of the straps slipped, revealing a bare, freckled shoulder. She swivelled round and slapped at my hand. "You're welcome," I said, flashing her a benevolent smile.

See, the thing is (and Doreen will attest to this), I've never been one to parade my assets about town despite at one stage being in possession of a fabulous pair of pins. Travel north and things got even more noteworthy – my whole upper hemisphere was, at one stage, the talk of the parish. "Even though she only wears skivvies," church members would whisper during one of Pastor Gregory's long-winded ramblings through Ephesians, "you can tell she has *quite* the décolletage."

But did I flash my flesh? Good heavens, no. I like to leave a little to the imagination! And for good

reason, too. Nothing says insecurity like a plunging neckline or thigh high boot. And what's more, I'm duty bound to pass this sense of self-worth on – to be the moral compass of this generation, sailing the high seas of propriety and taking no prisoners. My plan, I imagine, will be executed thusly:

Sidling up to an offender, a girl whose shorts are so short you can nearly see a buttock dangling in the breeze, I whisper, "I don't know if you've noticed, but you've got no pants on. Now, what we're going to do is..."

The scamp swivels round to identify her saviour.

"Look ahead, look ahead!" I say, in a voice that communicates both resolve and compassion. "For goodness sake, child – you've got a lot of chutzpah for someone with no pants on her person." As I scan the immediate area for a bathroom or somewhere else sufficiently secluded, I notice a few people shooting concerned glances in our direction. "Hi!" I say to an old lady wandering by, her mouth the shape of a deep O. "Nothing to see here. Just me and a scantily clad friend shooting the breeze." The woman clutches her belongings to her chest and scuttles off, presumably in the direction of centre management.

With a fresh sense of urgency, I grab my charge by the shoulders. "Now listen here, Von Teese," I say, fixing her with a steely gaze, "we've gotta be quick about this, so from hereon out you do exactly as I say. When I say jump, you say, how high."

"How high?"

"Not now, you fool – you're barely clothed. If anything, it should be how low."

"But how can I ever re-enter polite society?" says the little wretch, tears welling in her heavily lined eyes.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, I mutter to myself, eyes heavenward. I hand the girl a serviette. "There, there, dear," I say, pulling a colourful sarong from my tote bag and wrapping it around her waist. "Do exactly as I say and we might just make it out of here alive."

Already, most of the onlookers have begun to disperse, leaving in their wake one or two unyielding gawkers. "Is that really necessary?" I say, glaring at a balding man who is taking pictures as we pass by. He shrugs sheepishly and stuffs his camera into his bag.

By the time we reach the change rooms, my companion seems to have sobered up a little. "Are they really *that* short?" she asks, swivelling around and appraising her reflection in the bathroom mirrors. I narrow my eyes, and she reaches for the sarong.

When I return ten minutes later with a pair of corduroy slacks, the girl looks disappointed. She eyes the sensible fabric with a look of disdain, then stretches out the waistband, holding it up in front of her.

"I'm a ten," she says, finally, wrinkling up her nose and handing the pants back to me.

"You *were* a ten," I respond, ripping off the price tag. "And that'll be \$39.95."

A less generous woman might describe her expression as ungrateful, but rather than dwell on it, I launch into a spiel about the dangers of immodest clothing. When I get to the bit about her salvaged reputation, she brightens. "How will I ever repay you?!" she says, welling up again.

"Forget about it, kid," I respond, "but do me a favour – remember to wear *red*/shorts next time. And remember, no one will respect you until you respect yourself." With that I am off, waving aside a fellow shopper's pen and paper. "This signature isn't for sale, sweetheart," I say, as I smooth down my cape and stride out into the dawn of a brand new day.

To fight and conquer in all our battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting. SUN TZU (510 BC).

A relative, no doubt.

SEX, DRUGS, ROCK & ROLL

The licentiousness of certain carnival activities presents possibly the strongest disconnect between carnival and Christianity. Certainly, historical accounts of carnival often depict a relaxing of all standards: drunkenness, gluttony, lewdness and coarse language (described by Bakhtin as “billingsgate”) all appear common to the festive period. In contrast, Christianity advocates restraint in such areas.³⁸ While conceding a disjuncture here, I would like to add a brief caveat: namely that Christianity, while possibly divorced from certain aspects of the *historical carnival*, as outlined by Bakhtin, is nonetheless aligned with the carnivalesque *spirit*. While Bakhtin himself alludes to the “licentiousness” of carnival activities, his focus, as we have seen, is on extrapolating the historical carnival into a theory of the carnivalesque. In other words, he is interested in what such carnival excess *represents*, namely an affirmation of the grotesque, or the “material bodily principle” (Bakhtin 1984, 18), as opposed to the “classical” body, or “the bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being” (Bakhtin 1984, 24). In *Carnival, Creativity, and the Sublimation of Drunkenness*, Marty Roth makes the following observation:

in his study of ancient festivals, Photeine Bourboulis writes as if the symbolism of carnival suspended the claims of a material cause such as intoxication: ‘Restrains are indeed broken, but the breaking of them is, first, a break with the old life and secondly, a method of union, not merely the result of over-feeding and excessive drinking’ (1997, 2).

In other words, specific manifestations of licentiousness do not encapsulate the totality of the festival or carnival, but point to a deeper, symbolic reality – here described as both a “break with the old life” and “a method of union.”

As Elana Michelson notes: “In carnival, the body is valuable precisely because it is not a closed unity, but violates the boundaries between self and other, self and world” (1999, 142). This boundary between “self and other,” between the powerful and the disenfranchised, between the rich and the poor, the moral and the immoral, as we have seen, is violated in the course of Jesus’ ministry. Furthermore, he implores his “followers” to act accordingly.³⁹ The boundary between “self and world” is similarly transgressed through the act of Jesus’ incarnation, and the embrace of the physical body (with all its perceived limitations) in the resurrection. In *The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape*

³⁸ Galatians 5:19-21 cautions against “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery” as well as “drunkenness, orgies, and the like.” In 1 Peter 4:3, a similar warning is issued.

³⁹ In 1 John 3:17, Jesus states: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” Similarly, in Luke 14:12-14: “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors. . . . But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.”

into *Faith*, Nathan A. Scott suggests that comedy and the Christian outlook are wed inasmuch as they ground us in the bodily or “creatural,” noting:

The Christian imagination does not shrink . . . from the tangibility, from the gross concreteness, of our life in time, and it is not afraid to face the limited, conditioned nature of human existence. . . . The Christian has no desire to be an angel, but, rather, to the scandalization of all types of idealists and angelists, it does persist in wallowing about in all the temporal, creatural stuff of human life, for it was in this stuff that God Himself became Incarnate (1961, 37).

Thus, while admitting that certain carnival activities cannot be reconciled with Christianity, they nonetheless share with Christianity a deeper symbolic import. Both embrace the communal (and ultimately undifferentiated) body via the shattering of hierarchical distinctions and – as evidenced in the Incarnational act – return the “high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . to the material level” (Bakhtin 1984, 19).

REVELATIONS



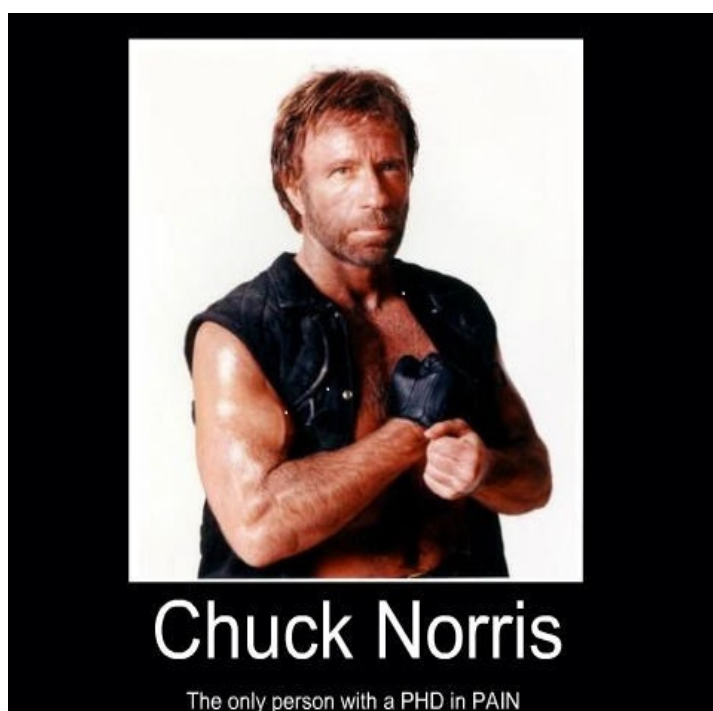
(Fig. 91)

In Peggy Thompson’s article *Comedy and Christianity: Surveying the Ground*, Thompson cautions against uncritically wedding Christianity with comedy, as some Christian scholars have done. She issues, however, a similar caution to those scholars whose “hostile essentializing” results in an a priori rejection of any such connection (1994, 59). Thompson highlights the varied expressions of both comedy and Christianity, suggesting that the relationship between the two is much more complex than either of these two positions presuppose. As an alternative, she advises that “specific, positive claims about the relationship between comedy and Christianity . . . be made only in reference to particular faiths, comic works, persons, and contexts” (1994, 70).

I argue that such an approach has here been implemented, albeit in relation to Christianity and carnival specifically: I have chosen what could be described as a specific “comic work” (namely Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque) and set it against a “particular faith.” While the specificity or “particularity” of the latter category is most apparent in the strictly autoethnographic component of this chapter, it is nonetheless operating in the pursuant portion of the chapter. In juxtaposing the Christian faiths exemplified by Jorge and Erasmus, I have provided two “particular,” albeit broader, examples of Christian faith (the latter of which I have aligned with the carnival), thus widening the scope without succumbing to the kind of gross generalisation Thompson discourages.

To recall Reed-Danahay’s triumvirate model, autoethnographers “vary in their emphasis on the writing and research process (*graphy*), culture (*ethnos*), and self (*auto*)” (1997, 2). In the second portion of this chapter, emphasis moved away from the *auto*, focussing instead on the *graphy* and the *ethnos*, however I believe it was vital for the autoethnographic work as a whole that my own personal experiences were situated within the broader cultural and historical context of Christianity. The title *A Carnival Christianity* thus alludes not only to the connection between my own personal faith and carnival, but to the broader carnivalesque implications of a Christian faith premised on “the counter-cultural, radical, anti-hierarchical, power reversal taught by Jesus” (A. Thatcher, 2007, 60).

THE AVERAGE BMI LADY SINGS



(Fig. 92)

Bakhtin's understanding of "truth," as we have seen, is that it is constituted dialogically and intersubjectively – it is created, in other words, through ongoing dialogue or conversation, through the intersection of multiple conflicting voices. With this in mind, I have avoided using the term "conclusion," since it suggests both a sense of finality and closure, and the promise of a series of authoritative answers from yours truly (none of which will be forthcoming). What I *can* offer, instead, are some reflections on the frustrating, messy, but ultimately rewarding, process of writing this autoethnography, as well as several insights or lower case 'e' epiphanies I have gleaned along the way about my relation with the carnivalesque. In the spirit of the carnival, I encourage the reader to *answer back*, as it were, to provide an alternative reading of what is at this particular moment functioning as the dominant text.

Perhaps, for example, they disagree with my view that Christianity shares certain links with the carnivalesque, differ on the degree to which my life has exhibited elements of the carnivalesque or, for that matter, how successfully specific instances of carnivalesque humour have worked to challenge or undermine oppressive sociocultural norms. *Not to worry*. I have changed or revised my own views several times over the course of writing this thesis. (More on that later.) This kind of prevarication or tentativeness is not indicative of half-baked research, rather it is the inevitable result of incorporating

into the research process one's "lived" life, made up as it is of imperfect and unavoidably biased recollections of, and reflections on, both the past and continuous present, mediated by a specific cultural/social context, and located within a particular temporal/historical moment.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

Anjali J. Forber-Pratt says of autoethnography that it is "not for the faint of heart" (2015, 822). Having completed one myself, I am inclined to agree. While it certainly has a degree of flexibility and the kind of artistic potentiality that makes it instantly appealing to someone with a creative bent, it comes with its own unique and demanding set of challenges. Those critics who fail to see in autoethnography sufficient rigour should be tasked with writing one themselves – they will soon be cured of any such misconceptions! For a start, the terrain is constantly shifting as new "data" from the present intrudes on the research process. Particularly at the beginning of my PhD when I was trying to sharpen my focus, certain events took place that necessitated a reorientation of my central and guiding questions. Additional data from the past caused similar changes in direction – when I stumbled across an old food diary, for example, complete with notes from my therapy sessions, I realised that an examination of gender norms would now take a pivotal place in the investigation.

Furthermore, the "self," as I have learned, is notoriously slippery. In *Searching for an Autoethnographic Ethic*, Stephen Andrew notes that "the 'I' is fractured and fragmented," describing the autoethnographer as "a complex creature [whose] complexity will have an impact on the research" (2017, 46). Certain aspects of my identity – my susceptibility to cultural norms, for example – were uncovered during the autoethnographic process, not to mention the shattering of several other illusions which I had about myself. Another occupational hazard facing the autoethnographer is the exploration into previously uncharted waters – the delving into uncomfortable, intensely personal, territory. While I had already spoken to some friends, family and the occasional shrink about my eating disorder, writing those experiences down was difficult (albeit liberating), as was sharing them with supervisors and presumably future readers.

Other recollections were similarly challenging. I found it hard to return to the brusque dismissal of my faith, however wavering that faith was or is, by the lecturer I mentioned – it reminded me of the challenges surrounding being a Christian (or, for that matter, subscribing to *any* religion) in contemporary Western society, of holding to beliefs which in many circles are viewed as anti-intellectual, anti-scientific, even downright *bonkers*. Now, as then, it is no walk in the park. I was

spurred on by the fact, however, that this was autoethnography doing some of its most important work despite the momentary discomfort to myself. As Pelias notes in *A Methodology of the Heart*, this type of writing involves “a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study” (2004, 1). It is in such moments of being laid bare, of letting the reader “in,” in other words, that autoethnography really begins to flex its methodological muscles.

I was also shocked at the degree to which culture (the pivotal *ethnos*) had shaped, sometimes for the worse, my identity. While I was aware of the unhealthy, patriarchally-grounded emphasis placed on female beauty, for example, exploring the theoretical grounds for that norm in conjunction with revisiting my eating disorder brought this knowledge front and centre. With the arbitrary nature of these kinds of ideals so clearly exposed, the idea of attempting to conform to them became increasingly ludicrous. As Andrew Hickey and Jon Austin observe, such revelations of the “everyday” can be liberating, the authors highlighting autoethnography’s ability to foster “dialogue between the subject and the social practices that they’ve engaged throughout their existence” (2007, 27) and to “provoke emancipatory consciousness raising activity” (2007, 21). The realisation of the extent to which the Self is culturally and socially constructed, according to Hickey and Austin, simultaneously exposes the possibility of *reconstruction*. This is the effect, I believe, of truly “encountering” oneself against the backdrop of social and cultural influences. One is so immersed in culture that its familiarity breeds, rather than contempt, *complacency*. As Wittgenstein observed: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes)” (1997, 50).

Finally, I was convinced of the *dialogic* potential of autoethnography the further I progressed in my research and writing.⁴⁰ I realised that others could share in my personal discoveries, relate them to their own situation and question not only my own presumptions or misconceptions, but their own. In short, the idea of *answering* questions became less important than *asking* them, and of encouraging others to do the same. I was more interested, in other words, in questions like: “who reads [my] work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?” (Ellis, T.E. Adams, and Bochner 2011, par. 39). I sincerely hope that these “journeys of the self” (Russell 1999) and the revelations that come from them, have amused, inspired and challenged others, as well as providing a space for further dialogue. That it has been a journey that has succeeded in “mov[ing] from the

⁴⁰ For more on this topic, see Anderson (2006), Spry (2001) and Toyosaki and Pensoneau-Conway (2016).

inside of the author to outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again” (Jones 2002, 53).

STATUS UPDATE (IT’S COMPLICATED)

The interrogative frame of this PhD explored three main axes of identity – gender, religion and class. In all of these arenas I observed the presence of the carnivalesque, whether that was in the form of particular carnivalesque “moments” or “instances,” or in what I viewed as an overall comically-infused approach to life and apparent appreciation of the disruptive and subversive potential of humour. I displayed, I believe, a carnivalesque propensity to view “the entire world . . . in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity” (Bakhtin 1984, 11). Having said that, I acknowledge that at numerous points along the way I have also evidenced what might be considered *anti-carnival* or *extra-carnival* behaviour. (I will reflect on these incidences in a moment.) It is useful, however, to be reminded of the fact that Bakhtin speaks of a “spirit” of carnival, of disruptive “moments,” rather than a final, fixed state. Often, when these extra-carnival moments arrive, as I have illustrated, they are stamped out in a subsequent act of carnivalesque humour. This is in line with Bakhtin’s notion of the ambivalent nature of carnival laughter, that it both “asserts and denies . . . buries and revives” (1984, 12).

In my Introduction, I outlined the importance and ubiquity of humour in my life. What was interesting to note over the course of examining, revisiting and compiling data, was the particularly *carnivalesque* aspect of much of the humour. Three main attributes, in particular, led me to this conclusion, and they are as follows:

Humorous instances often took the form of pranks or tricks and mimicked aspects of trickster/trickstar behaviour.

In Chapter Three, I suggested that the six-point trickster schema proposed by Hynes and Doty (1997, 34) would be the backdrop against which I assessed any connections between myself and the trickster figure. Many of those links have been explored (albeit somewhat organically) throughout this thesis, but here I will revisit them systematically, providing one brief example for each applicable trait in an effort to tie up loose ends and make each connection *explicit*.

Of the six traits mentioned in Chapter Three (“fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous,” “deceiver/trick-player,” “shape-shifter,” “situation-inverter,” “messenger/imitator of the gods” and “sacred/profane bricoleur”), at least two are operating in the prank my friend Jacinta and I pulled on

my friend Sharon in Chapter Six. By virtue of even enacting the prank, for example, and attempting to hoodwink our (bless her) *exceptionally* gullible friend, we see evidence of trickster as “deceiver and trick-player.” Furthermore, “shape shifting” occurs on multiple levels as we assume not only different clothing – see two wildly-inaccurate burqas – but, via their symbolic power, an alternative religion and identity.

In regards to the third attribute, that of “situation-inverter,” its presence can be seen in Chapter Five, in the blog post about my brother’s hair, as well as our comical reappropriation of his graduation outfit. In the first instance, disseminating my satirical response to Miik’s “friendly” piece of mail on the blog and Facebook platform challenged or *inverted* what was formerly a one-sided, *for your eyes only*, normative critique, opening it up to a dialogic interplay of voices. The status quo was similarly inverted through the act of our taking Miik’s graduation garments “to the streets,” thus upsetting the prestige associated with that particular attire.

Fourthly, the “sacred/profane bricoleur” aspect of my behaviour was amply exemplified in the “biblegate” story recounted in Chapter Seven, but can also be seen in various aspects of the aforementioned humorous pranks or incidences (our donning of Islamic garb for pranking purposes, for example). There are also many instances throughout my creative writing where “sacred” or lofty material is demoted through the use of satire, parody and irony.

As for the characteristic which, according to Hynes and Doty, is “at the heart” of all the other traits (1997, 34), namely the trickster’s status as a “fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous” figure, this covers not only the absence in my findings of a personal connection with the sixth and final trait (“messenger/imitator of the gods”),⁴¹ but provides space for the conformist, anti-trickster, anti-carnival behaviour I sometimes displayed, and which will be discussed further below. Furthermore, and interrelatedly, the flux in my identity evidenced throughout this thesis mimics that of the trickster, who oscillates between a variety of roles, personas, and identities.

My humour always seems to have a decidedly critical, carnivalesque edge.

There is a consistent, apparent desire on my part to expose pomposity and hypocrisy, to slaughter sacred cows and question social mores. This is operating, as we have seen, in many of the aforementioned trickster-like incidents and pranks, but it is also evident throughout many of my creative pieces as I question or ridicule social hierarchies and arbitrary cultural norms through the tools of satire, parody and irony. Around the same time that I was reflecting on the possibility that my

⁴¹ Be wary of anyone that can.

creative work might communicate certain subconscious motivations, beliefs and concerns of mine, I stumbled across the following quote from Jorge Luis Borges:

A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, tools, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face (1973, 15-16).

While I hope I've got at least a few more years left before I kick the bucket, this quote rung true for me, particularly as I saw certain recurring themes emerge in my writing, themes which revealed interesting, hitherto submerged, aspects of my identity. In re-examining my creative work, I was struck by the extent, for example, that arrogance, taking oneself too seriously and self-delusion annoyed me. Fictional works evidenced this – the epistolary piece between the two Arts students, for instance, was loosely modelled on some of the people I have met in my travels, exaggerated for comic and satirical effect. Interestingly, however, it was more often *I* who was the subject of this critique, as evidenced in the majority of my autobiographical essays and vignettes: it is this aspect of my writing which leads me to my last major link with the carnivalesque.

The critique contained within this humour is always simultaneously self-directed

As we have seen, carnival laughter is universal and all-inclusive. Often, after writing one of my “creative” pieces or reflecting on a humorous instance from my life, I was amazed by what a little killjoy I was, how concerned with being perceived a particular way or conforming to cultural ideals. Admittedly, I hammed up certain personality traits for comical effect, but these stories nonetheless reflected, I believe, a kernel of self-righteousness, pomposity and conformity – in other words, the same kinds of extra-carnival inclinations I ridiculed in others. This discovery, though, rather than resulting in an attempt on my part to quash any evidence and direct the criticism outwards, made me *highlight* the existence of these inconsistencies and failings in my life. This is the difference between the kind of “negative” satire discussed by Bakhtin, wherein the satirist “places himself above the object of his mockery” (Bakhtin 1984, 12), and carnival laughter, which directs that mockery not only outwards but *inwards*.

I have discussed in detail the carnivalesque implications of the excursion into town with my brother, he in full regalia, me in tow, highlighting its comical disregard for the signifying power of that particular attire. While I maintain those assertions, I must admit that having a doctorate myself, and along with it a certain social status, is something that I will probably take some (well-disguised) satisfaction from, regardless of my best intentions. The creative piece concerning my relative incompetence at pretty

much every job I've ever had (that one was a surprisingly faithful account of reality) brings me back down to earth, though, and in that moment any delusions of grandeur are comically punctured. I might have a doctorate one day, yes, but I will always be the girl who has nailed only one *practical* skill: feeding paper through a shredder. In such examples, I enact Bakhtin's notion that "the people's ambivalent laughter . . . expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (1984, 12).

REVISITING CHAPTER SEVEN

Autoethnography, as Spry argues, is an often messy, fragmented process and form (2016), and these attributes go some way towards explaining the tangential nature of Chapter Seven – *the one about Christianity*, as I would often describe it to my supervisor, Jenny. It was also the most unwieldy as I moved from reflections on my Christian identity and its intersection with contemporary Western society, to reflections on the carnivalesque nature of Christianity itself. The investigation of Christianity's carnivalesque qualities while (admittedly) somewhat peripheral, can be understood not as a divergent exercise moving away from my central argument, but a continuation or evolution of my investigation of Self. As revealed at the beginning of Chapter Seven, I have always had a fraught relationship with my faith – I had spoken of my childhood view of God as cold and indifferent, for example. It was useful, after reflecting on this fact, to revisit the gospels and re-examine some of my own preconceptions – furthermore, to see if any of the carnivalesque attributes I was arguing for in my own life were mirrored in the Christian faith.

This thesis has been exploratory rather than definitive. As such, I have placed less importance on the *outcome* of convincing the reader of Christianity's links with the carnivalesque than in the *process* of investigating, with them, what I saw as the key connections between the two. For my part, I see in the Christian faith aspects of the antihierarchical, anti-canonical, inversion of the prevailing order that might go some way towards explaining Bakhtin's carnivalesque reading of the gospels. What I am more confident of is that people will see in my *particular* approach to Christianity the kind of carnivalesque qualities I have elsewhere evidenced. In the self-directed, satirical laughter of creative pieces such as *Roadworthy*, for example, or in my mingling of the sacred and the profane at biblegate. Importantly, in this most "consecrated" of arenas, the carnivalesque, along with its impious revelry, intrudes, stamping out the Pharisaical not only in others but, more importantly, myself.

HASTA LA VISTA, BABY

Like Stuart Hall, I challenge the notion of identity as “an already accomplished fact,” viewing it, instead, “as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1997, 51). Or, to phrase it in Bakhtinian terms: “As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word” (1993, 59). This fact, I believe, should colour every aspect of the autoethnographic research process, along with the final product of that research. It would be inauthentic to present a definitive, fixed picture of myself when that kind of stability and finality is not reflected in reality. As Arthur W. Frank notes:

In Bakhtin’s dialogical ideal, the research report must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be” (2005, 966-967).

In this sense, I cannot say exactly how strong my connections with the carnivalesque are, only point to its role in my life *thus far*. Who knows what further links between myself and the carnivalesque will occur in the future and whether, perhaps, they will be occasioned by my insights here? As Humphrey notes in *Bakhtin and the Study of Popular Culture*, “transgression, where it is found in contemporary popular culture and in the historical record, is a *starting point*, not a conclusion” (2000, 171, emphasis mine).

The real findings that emerge from autoethnography, I believe, are the ones that the reader brings to the work as they place themselves in another’s shoes, see their own struggles reflected within a different context, time and place. This is autoethnography’s main offering, an interactional and relational one, as it “show[s] people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean” (Ellis 2016, 317). I fully anticipate that in revisiting this thesis five years from now, my interpretation of the data will have shifted based on, amongst other things, further research, reading, writing and new life experiences.

Hell, I might not even find Chuck Norris jokes funny.^{42 43}

⁴² Chuck Norris jokes will survive the apocalypse.

⁴³ As will Chuck.

Appendix





List of Images

Figure

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